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A "CHAOS IN DESIGN" READER

FRONT COVER

Cover: A guitarist plays in Parvaz Park, Tétran,
after US/Israeli bombing of the Shahrān oil depot
March 7th, 2026 © Mohammad Mohsenifar

The idea of "being" an artist—as a profession, as an identifier within our particular social environment—depends on the absolute that art is something special which some people do and others don't.

"WHEN YOU'RE IN THE SHIT UP TO YOUR NECK, THERE'S NOTHING LEFT

Leslie Rosario-Olivo

TO DO BUT SING."

My hunger has lead me to ridiculous places in search of nourishment. For example, some friends and I once snuck into a small eatery being given by the author Chris Kraus for a cohort of MFA students. In this time she claimed something along the lines of "you all are here because you're special because you care about art. You care about making things, and you care about your ideas—but people out there, people who don't write, who don't paint, who go about their daily lives solely consuming, they live sad interior lives". For a quick, staggering moment it felt true. *How sad it must be to not be an artist, yes, what a dismal and flat interiority that must be.*

—SAMUEL BECKETT (SUPPOSEDLY?)

And then almost immediately I got a wave of nausea at the sentiment. It struck me as one of the most classist and deluded forms of flattery you could try to cover artists and writers in training looking for real-world guidance with. People "choose" to be consumers as much as they "choose" to be born—it is, largely, a role one falls into if they live in a consumerist society. This is because consumption is the only way of relating to life which the society, and those who are for it, professes is possible, and aspirational, for an individual's life. From birth to adulthood, the structure justifies itself and implicates anyone within it to identify with it.

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BEING AN ARTIST IS A GLAMOROUS LIE

Leslie Rosario-Olivo

My hunger has lead me to ridiculous places in search of nourishment. For example, some friends and I once snuck into a small talk being given by the author Chris Kraus for a cohort of MFA students. In this talk she claimed something along the lines of, 'you all are here because you're special, because you care about art. You care about making things, and you care about your ideas—but people out there, people who don't write, who don't paint, who go about their daily lives solely consuming, they live sad interior lives'. For a quick, staggering moment it felt true. *How sad it must be to not be an artist, yes, what a dismal and flat interiority that must be.*

And then almost immediately I got a wave of nausea at the sentiment. It struck me as one of the most classist and deluded forms of flattery you could try to cover artists and writers in training looking for real-world guidance with. People "choose" to be consumers as much as they "choose" to be born—it is, largely, a role one falls into if they live in a consumerist society. This is because consumption is the only way of relating to life which the society, and those who are for it, professes is possible, and aspirational, for an individual's life. From birth to adulthood, the structure justifies itself and implicates anyone within it to identify with it.

Should enough contradictions of the society's mythology make themselves apparent, one might then be motivated to exist against it. To identify with it is simply to live one's life within the ideals, values, and mythology of the environment. To not identify with it is to think for oneself, to consider what kind of world one wants to live in, and orient one's life in accordance with the actions necessary to help bring forth its existence. This is not a minor feat, and many delude themselves into thinking they are paying their own way when in reality they are simply replicating the very models they have been given by the society.

Many may feel called to dream, or to identify as a dreamer, an artist, a free-thinker, a dissident—if you will—but to do this without one's efforts being completely subsumed or rerouted by the forces of a society's influence requires the abandonment of an investment in enjoying the benefits of its social contract.

However few they may be, to exist in accordance with the definitions of success laid out by the social environment brings one closer to reaping the benefits of the social contract, and thus justifying the externally defined purpose given to one's existence. In being against it, one is seemingly left with 2 options.

1. *Destroy. Rage quit, leave society (literally, or metaphorically) through civic death, suicide, immigration, etc.*

2. *Play with a self-defined purpose. This will likely be inherently opposed to the one given. Nurture its vision relentlessly. Protect it from the incessant onslaught of external influence concerned with and tuned to the ideals and visions of a society it aims to oppose.*

There may seem to be two options, but I actually think destruction inevitably leads to the need for self-defined purpose. In a way, both options are two sides of the same coin. Destruction may seem like the easiest orientation to take to counter oppressive systems, but it comes with the necessity to nurture something in the absence it creates because it [destruction] is not an absolute in and of itself. Pursuing it as an absolute is how we get fascism. Pursuing growth, as opposed to nurturing, is also how we get fascism. This is like Peter Thiel and all the technocrats pillaging the world's clean water and air in pursuit of "technological advancement" at the benefit of economic growth's whole thing right now. I digress. Back to smaller villains. Back to Chris Kraus.

Half of the room seemed hypnotized—charmed into a passive stupor by her

mild celebrity, and the other I couldn't read. I sneaked blank-faced glances at my friend sitting a few seats over, only mildly engaging the muscles around my eyes to convey I was grimacing at the ordeal. She genuinely seemed to believe, and want to convey in good faith, that because this group of young people were getting MFAs they were somehow inherently different (with the judgment of: *better*) than all other persons, including other artists, that *weren't* pursuing an MFA. As if the MFA wasn't just another form of consumption. As if it stood outside the boundaries of the logic of participating in the consumption cycle; as if the MFA wasn't a thing one bought into in order to better produce objects within the society to then be consumed in large enough numbers in order to better make money off the endeavor which could then be used to consume more. She seemed to genuinely believe that the interiority of the people in the room was more valuable, more important, than those outside it, and that the interiority of those who don't express it through "the arts" is impoverished compared to those who do. That the interiority of career artists is somehow more special than non-artists.

She was doing them a favor. To Kraus, art is something special which some people do and others don't. Her reinforcing of

this belief in this cohort of MFA students would create a beautiful delusion to carry them through their post-grad years (or to some hypothetical point of deconstruction where they might reckon with the fact that it's not the whole truth). In that moment she reinforced their artistic egos with a nice set of assumptions and judgments regarding themselves and others; she was solidifying their identities as artists—a distinct class—as a part of something bigger and more meaningful than whatever *others* were participating in, and she created this other as something which these artists could exist against—distinctly, and unique from.

The issue I took with Kraus' vocalized-confessions of classism is that their implications denied the realities of the potential of the human spirit being influenced, if not wholly determined, by the material conditions surrounding the body in which the spirit is enclosed. Marx's historical materialism posits that, "human beings derive meaning from their material conditions and the products they create, asserting that these relationships are never static. Marx argued that internal conflicts arise from the evolving means and relations of production, leading to broader political and social transformations".¹ In

the case of art-making, one's access to materials and certain ideas becomes limited or expanded by one's material conditions. Do you have the time and money to buy into an MFA program? To study art history and understand the canon? To learn about subliminal communication and affect? To research ideas which interest you and you'd like to explore? To purchase materials and studio space to play and experiment with a medium? It makes sense to me that Kraus justifies her role as an artist, and thus other artists, as a result of a "special mind" that, for *some* reason, cares about ideas and is more deeply engaged with reality than others. That there's this mystical distance maintained between a perspective towards art as an avenue for self-expression, self-grandization, and profitability and it's reality as a phenomenon influenced by gross reality. For the same reason that it makes sense to me that Peter Thiel thinks his experience working at a law firm for 7 years and then choosing to leave to become a supervillain proves that people who are stuck using all of their waking hours working to pay rent, and pay off debt, and simply survive can just someday choose to become supervillain millionaires too if they'd just think a little harder about how to bring forth a new business endeavor into capitalism as geniusly vampiric² as

a real estate management group they can sell for millions to Black Rock in a few years. It's the same reductionist, capitalist, survival-of-the-fittest, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps non-sense we've been beaten over the head with since the dawn of totalitarian agriculture. *There are those who take life by the horns, and tame it, and those who are losers.* I don't have the desire to compile all the evidence widely available to contest this brutish sentiment. It doesn't matter how much evidence you throw at a brut—if brut want smash, brut smash. But if we want to live, we have to find ways to keep bruts from smashing us, the things that keep us alive, the things we care about, and build structures, both internal and external, that aren't controlled or hijackable by bruts.

EVERYTHING IS NOT AS IT SEEMS

Art, and its appreciation, is a natural activity—like breathing, and walking—something which we are inclined to engage in during leisurely time. It is an activity which follows from being moved by our environments. The artistic or creative impulse has been around long before society as we understand it and is currently organized. This means art has existed before ideas of

1. Duffy, E. by F. (n.d.). *Marx and Historical materialism: Research starters: Ebsco research*. EBSCO. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/marx-and-historical-materialism>

2. Graeber, D., & Thiel, P. (2020, May 8). *David Graeber vs Peter Thiel: Where Did the Future Go?* YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0cz28OmCGw>

capital, and of high vs low. It's an impulse which can even be observed in animals other than humans—which leads me to believe it is an impulse inherent to life. The level of intention with which different forms of life may be able to approach art and creativity (at least in my present understanding of subjectivities) varies greatly. The momentum of a group of cells being moved by the activation of Cdk1-cyclin B1, a protein complex thought to begin the process of mitosis, is, I would argue, a creative act;³ this act, however, according to prevailing models, is seemingly mechanistic in a way which human creativity is not. If we are to deal with the matter of human creativity, we will have to deal with intention (much to the dismay of the horde of artists and critics who seem to be content wading in the waters of meaninglessness and passive-ideation where simply the gesture has become a work of art [it is art, just not a very “good” one—which is fine! One can make “bad” art—but we shouldn't aspire to “bad” art. And personally, I hate seeing people demand praise for “bad” art—but maybe that's just me! Okay, another aside over]).

Humans across cultures, environments, and history appreciate and create art;

though it's evolutionary purpose is not as (seemingly) straightforward as that of cell division, or breathing, because it is not as (seemingly) mechanistic and life-affirming, it is obvious that its prevalence is an indicator of life concerned with, sensitive to, and motivated by matters beyond just survival; it is an indicator of a sensitivity to something immaterial, to beauty, phenomena which our anthropocentric and efficiency-concerned models of questioning and value frameworks (mainly “science”,⁴ economics, and white supremacy in the U.S.) continuously discredit and consider insignificant—an externality. This is a result of a culture thrown out of balance by an overwhelming supposition of gross materialism, “a belief system that considers only physical matter as real, neglecting spiritual truths”.⁵

These anthropocentric, gross⁶, and efficiency-concerned frameworks are lenses which we put over our thinking to justify our ways of living. The logics of technofascism, economics, the pseudosciences of bioessentialism and race-science, are not

absolute truths of nature—they are loose stories we⁷ tell ourselves which may seem to aspire to describe systems, aspire to true scientific theories and observations of organization, but which center the circulation of money, power, and control—all at the cost of life and truth. These stories appeal to us as guiding lights of thought because they seem to aspire to “science”, “objectivity”, “true observation”—things we've typically perceived as virtuous, as inarguably “good” things for humanity which have allowed us to “evolve” and “take control of the raw material of life” for the last 10,000 years or so—yet purposely exclude or warp vital information which disproves their verity. This is mythology. The non-mythological story is much uglier, and it goes as such: These gross ways of perceiving reality have been preserved, proliferated, and expanded upon by a culture which refuses to allow any cultures with alternative ways of seeing and being from existing, thus creating the appearance of a monopoly on reason, virtue, and truth.

For some reason⁸, we⁹ largely put up with this arrangement of things. We may find ourselves frustrated by our societal structures and ideological restraints, but we

4. Air quotes cause real, curiosity driven, life-affirming science is hanging on tooth and nail to survive in the face of technofascism and conspiratorial drift, which is not science - it's a mythology of supremacy and control.

5. <https://www.wisdomlib.org/concept/gross-materialism/#:~:text=Gross%20materialism%20is%20described%20in,as%20real%2C%20neglecting%20spiritual%20truths.>

6. In the gross-materialism way, not in the “ew” way, but also in the “ew” way cause gross materialism is pretty ew.

7. NOT ME, but you know, the collective humanity we.

8. Probably historical materialism. I'm probably not smarter than Marx.

9. The collective we, but I am also pointing the finger and looking at the other 3 pointing back. The loyalist and the actionless-disident.

sooner default to pointing blame—at others, at ourselves, at the fundamental makeup of the species¹⁰—as a way of evading the harder work of critical analysis; of evading contemplating on the possibilities reflected back to us by our current and formative environments, and what our desires for that to look like actually are; of evading acting on those visions of an appealing future and working with the present to make them a reality. We attempt to alleviate the symptoms of our stressful life structures as opposed to confronting the absurdity of their arrangements at the root. We see the evidence that something is very wrong! We are devolving [de-evolving, regressing] into forms of authoritarianism and fascism, and we keep trying to fix the easily accessible issues, to put a bandaid on things and hide the evidence of a deeper problem, as opposed to getting down and dirty and finding what's actually wrong. I think we do this because to truly look what is wrong in the face and address it completely would require tremendous change on our parts. What is wrong is simple. Frustratingly so. Our dominating ways of life—our extractive, costly, modern lifestyles—are unsustainable for all life on this planet.

10. Think of all the salvationist religions who claim humans just need some external power or grace bestowed upon them through submission to an ideology in order to be "saved" from their inherently flawed nature. Now that's a story!

Ourselves included. To continue on as we are doing as a species, claiming we are still orienting ourselves towards the good of all, towards improving our conditions of life, while burning and destroying our capacities for life, well—

Trying to "do something about it", while simultaneously trying to maintain the unsustainable lifestyle in a state of good consciousness¹¹ by ignoring the problem, or trying to scapegoat it, is like trying to create a math formula, finding an inconsistency in it which disproves the legitimacy of the proof you thought you'd discovered, and instead of taking that inconsistency into account and allowing it to re-route your efforts, you continue miscalculating by pretending you didn't see the blunder and continuing on as you did before its revelation. Fascists are really good at this. So are technocrats. And liberals. Our capitalist, neoliberal, imperial, manifest-destiny ass, relentless-endless-growth, and expansion focused societies are oriented around capital, economic activity, consumerism, and war. We are taught to derive our meaning and purpose for being alive from acquiring and accumulating things, maintaining and enjoying the surplus of resources we have stolen from others,¹² and doing everything

11. Because for some reason seldom do evil people seem to believe they are evil...

in our power to justify this way of being. This wide-spread mythology of purpose and motivation has been seeded in us through thorough indoctrination in messaging from all different angles. Our environments and the stories most easily accessible to us echo on and on, *this is as good as it gets, make the most of it. It is your right, and your duty, to take, take, take.* In this model, this way of seeing the world, where capital and "more" is God, where the accumulation and consolidation of capital, and power¹³ into the hands of fewer and fewer at and by the cost of quality and viability of life for others is not only an inevitability, but the intention, art is overwhelmingly perceived to be only as good as its ability to facilitate that process. For large organizing systems like corporations and governments, yes, but also by individual artists just aspiring to get their piece of the pie.

Art, however, is a necessity for the continuation of life. Not the continued consolidation of capital, or power, of course, but definitely life. Where and when these efficiency-concerned frameworks cannot

12. There is never a true other. What we steal from another we steal from ourselves. If we steal the capacity for life from another, we steal it from ourselves as well. This may sound like a metaphor, but I am being literal. It will not matter where in the world you are, or how much money you have—if we continue to live in a way which makes life unsustainable, the future of our life is implicated as well. You are already being killed. We are already dying a slow death. It doesn't have to be this way.

13. The stakes of power here, I should clarify, imply the ability to judge and decide who gets to live or die.

use art to create material change, and/or reinforce their own philosophical authority, they deem it frivolous. Those that (and I say this in as good of faith as I can muster) subconsciously cling to both the futurity of the framework and the lie that they want change create reductionist, sentimental, and patronizing justifications for its existence. In other words, these frameworks cannot take art seriously. To do so would threaten the foundations of the logic that give these frameworks credence. My suspicions are that if we were to study art, with a rigorous focus on understanding how it affects our physiological states of being, we would find it is, like most regularly recurring phenomena in systems of life, a regulatory tool which allows us to accommodate information into our worldviews—to catch up internally with changes reflected in our environment, allowing us to see more clearly, and thus move and adapt more clearly. In other words, with intention; in alignment with our intuitive¹⁴ guidance and how it responds to external stimuli; sensory information which informs the feedback loop of **homeostasis**. Think of the dysregulated nervous system; under an excess

14. Oxford dictionary defines intuitive as, "using or based on what one feels to be true even without conscious reasoning; instinctive"—which I think is reductive, but I like the vastness of networks and information available to us in subconscious or unconscious reasoning as a definition. Intuitive knowing is based on knowledge and logic, but knowledge and logic which we don't fully understand or can easily transmit in rational terms.

of accumulated stress it creates a positive feedback loop in its attentiveness to any and all threats, immediate or hypothetical, thus creating more stress, and on and on.¹⁵ A desensitized aesthetic faculty is likely to mislead in a similar way.¹⁶ These systems are not isolated from one another—they work in tandem through delicate and elaborate communication cues. The nervous system soothed by the sight of something beautiful is only capable of feeling that effect because of the brain's physiological response to perceiving beauty, which is then moved to release dopamine, which then sends various signals throughout the body to constrict or relax blood vessels, and affect insulin production, the shifts of which are registered by the body as information which then feeds back into the nervous system which continues to adjust to the changing information.¹⁷

This isn't a new line of inquiry—what manipulating stimuli can do to elicit different responses of human biological systems. I open this line of thinking in this piece

15. O'Donovan, Aoife et al. "Exaggerated neurobiological sensitivity to threat as a mechanism linking anxiety with increased risk for diseases of aging." *Neuroscience and biobehavioral reviews* vol. 37,1 (2013): 98-108. doi:10.1016/j.neubiorev.2012.10.013

16. Art made from a desensitized aesthetic faculty will only reinforce that misperception and calibration.

17. Barnett, Kelly Sarah, and Fabian Vasiu. "How the arts heal: a review of the neural mechanisms behind the therapeutic effects of creative arts on mental and physical health." *Frontiers in behavioral neuroscience* vol. 18 1422361. 2 Oct. 2024. doi:10.3389/fnbeh.2024.1422361

because it has led me to the most neutral definition of what art is: a phenomenon which enacts change. Art is also something we make. So it is an intentionally crafted phenomenon which enacts change. This definition makes it abundantly obvious to me that art contains a tremendous amount of power. I don't mean this sentimentally, I mean literally—art is full of power, and the potential for change, in the same way that molecules interact with one another and have the potential to rip each other apart in order to come together in new ways. This power raises matters of morality- power, and thus art (as a medium for the flux of influence and power), can be used to create, nurture, and destroy.

The drawings, poems, and songs we compose and keep to ourselves are as much art as the sculptures, paintings, and photographs we may choose to share with others—however, the potential for impact of the work changes drastically between the art we make for ourselves to understand our own relationship to the world, and the art we make with the intention of sharing with others, to share our experiences and perspectives on incidents which we have perceived and been moved by.

When I imagine ideal pieces of artwork, I imagine projects which are connected by an ambition towards studying the implications

of art as controlled stimuli capable of enacting change, and crafting around those findings; creating something which is not just an anesthetic for the pain of our time, or indulgent navel-gazing at the hopelessness around us, or a pacifying vehicle for escapism into a realm of hedonistic pleasure—but refining a tool which reveals to those engaging with the work the potential of the self and creates the conditions which assist in the self-actualization, healing, or liberation of those engaging with the work, encouraging them to pick up the revelation and create something¹⁸ with its momentum and edge.

It is completely within reason that we can assume that if there are artists who have had the realization that art can enact change and have directed that realization towards a particular aim (in this case, helping others free themselves of externally defined purpose), that there are also artists who have had this realization and wielded these tools for other purposes; with the intention of selling and making money, seducing, collecting praise, influencing opinions, mobilizing (or immobilizing) people, etc. Though the intention of works can be manipulated through the setting which art is displayed in,¹⁹ there is a lot of power in the minds and intentions of

artists; the perspectives they cultivate and imbue their works with. There is even more power in our gaze as viewers.

We have the power to make choices in what we give our attention to. Artists know this. They must wield the elements at their ready so as to give you something you may want to pay attention or become permeable to. Some of them are willing to lie to you. Some of us are willing to be lied to, as long as it's immediately enjoyable, or satisfies some other desire. Our politicians are artists of sorts. Their elements are words and sentiments. They stoke the fervor of the people, the structures of logic, to influence public opinion. To reflect our desires back to us and offer cheap, unsustainable thrills and "solutions" to our very real problems. To manufacture consent for their own agendas by creating stories that implicate the masses, that suggest it is in their best interest to persecute some group or other, and that this will bring prosperity, prestige, a solid identity one can lean on as the member of a "great" nation. To craft a narrative, a myth—of themselves, a nation, their role in and on the nation—where you are implicated; through an invitation to surrender your own subjectivity to reap its meager benefits, a proclamation of your enemyhood through the scapegoat process, or identified as a dissident to the myth by

choosing to oppose the relinquishment of your own subjectivity. The technocrats do it too. In their story you're either going to be helping them with their "revolutionary" visions of terra-forming Mars and re-structuring private equity to bitcoin or whatever non-sense it is their working on at any given moment to funnel money and attention away from life itself. Personally, I don't like being lied to. At this point they don't even bother telling you it's gonna make your life better though. I'm also not fond of lying. And I believe in the values of cooperative societies that aim to nurture the conditions which make life sustainable, prosperous, safe, equal, and possible for all.

For these reasons, I believe in art that is created by a motivation and belief in the cultivation of life and the alleviation of unnecessary suffering. I see no other way of making art like this than by going into the act of making knowing you are taking on the role of a cosmic artisan, and doing so because you have glimpsed a potential, a future, a glimmer of beauty and understanding of the interconnectivity of all life and systems, and wanted to share that with others to better attune ourselves as a collective to the rhythms of the world and life around us so that we may better align with its best aspects.

18. Perhaps an artwork, perhaps a new identity.

19. see *Entartete Kunst*, 1937, and *The New American Painting*, 1959

There is no easier way to deconstruct the illusions, mythology, and contradictions artists weave around themselves and their works than to contextualize them and their motivations within the art market. Personally, I go to art with a faith-full heart, looking for connection and reflections on experiences about life, and though I can accept that there is always an aspect of the work that will be influenced by its existence within a market, I struggle to stomach art made in bad faith—with a predominant concern for being palatable and marketable. **It is life-force which gets funneled happily into the night of commodification—exchanging the potential for change and inspiration in order to reap the rewards of a social contract with an economic system which seeks only to take what it can from you, including, eventually, the very meager rewards you engaged in it for.**

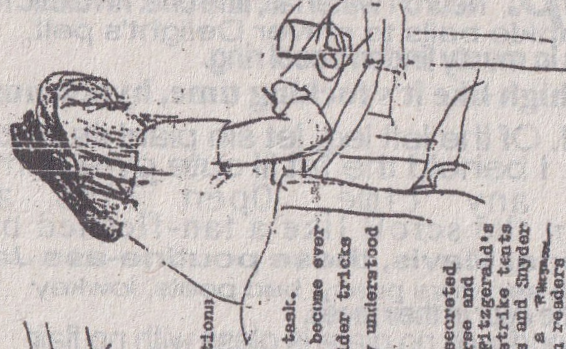
My thesis is simple: Reject the role of the artist. Someday, we will be able to be artists again—but, for now, the artist is a self-indulgent, glamorous lie we tell ourselves to feel better about rejecting the societal death-drive, while secretly bowing our heads to it and reaping its benefits. Aspire for more. Your task, should you be one who feels called to working with materials, who is haunted by ideas floating in the unmaterialized, haunted to the point

of needing and making active attempts at materializing them somehow, is to look at the world around you and figure out which ideas want to live. Get quiet within yourself. Very quiet. Quiet enough that you begin to hear where the thoughts and ideas that seem to spring spontaneously from you actually come from. When you've seen where that well of ideas comes from, begin the creative work of discerning which ideas are concerned with your expansion, and which ones are concerned with your contracting. Cultivate the ones concerned with life. Not just because its "right", or "good" (your sentimental attachments to "goodness" are hijackable)—but because you are alive, and you can not deny that as a fact. You are alive, and despite whatever protestations you may have against the pains and troubles of being alive, a fact of your being is that your body's mechanisms want to live. The fact that you cannot stop your breath, that you cannot stop your heart, that you cannot think yourself a black hole to suck yourself out of existence without external intervention means that you, your discrete existing self, are not privy to the secrets of the universe—and yet, you exist. Not just as a modem, or a machine, but as a being with the capacity to feel things, and to influence feelings. Humble yourself before life, accept that it is here, and *respect* it by being in it.

For the sake of your freedom, of your existence, and for the sake of the existence of life on Earth as a whole, you must imbue your life with meaning, and values, and continuously exercise your will to do so. Someone will always be ready to do so for you, and will impose their meaning onto you—whether you create your own or not. They will assign you a meaning foreign to yourself. The meaning they ascribe you might be death. Someday someone may tell you your purpose is simply to be sacrificed. You must be an artisan. Not a celebrity, not a collector, not an icon, or an idol—these are all things which may or may not be projected upon you in your pursuit of creation, but you must be an artisan. You must look at the tools and material available to you; contemplate what is there, envision what you want to be there, and then move in harmony with those visions. Begin with what is most immediately apparent. Your psyche is there, and there are parts of it which have been arranged for you. You have been taught to care and value certain things, and there are things you have been taught to fear. Understand them all to be bricks building a larger structure. Is it arranged to your liking? If it were up to you, is this what life would look like? ♦*

The Usual Notes About Beckonings of the Muse:
A poet is an alchemist searching
for magical words for transm-
ing souls.

An striking hanging
metal creates reson-
ance reorganizing the
air to touch the inner
ear, leaving words for
later, poetic techniques
abandon ordinary unmagical
methods.



Literary symbolism's quest for incantations
began with rhyme and even anagram and
alliteration and even an atheist like
Shelley felt compelled to shoulder the task.
Over the years our trickery has had to become ever
more refined and subtle, because the older tricks
like rhyme and meter become more widely understood
and lose their mystery of enchantment.

From the New England Puritan who secreted
the letters of his name into a verse and
deemed it a portent of Heaven to Fitzgerald's
Khayyam conjuring up phantoms to strike tents
to Whitman's ringing proclamations and Snyder
direct-presenting of the organic, a ^{Western} search
for incantations to bewitch readers
goes ever looking in more unlikely corners
for half-grasped magical techniques.

This is the purest application of the abstract principles of
alchemy imaginable.

One reason Gary Snyder's poems are powerful is because, how-
ever original he may become, he never strays far from what in
the past was the stuff of mantras, both the history and the
myth.

This is alight of kind of one kind among many used by the
literary alchemist working what is magic because it seems
enough like magic to invoke that momentary voluntary suspension
of belief or unbelief, whichever was there, for the sake of
causing a sudden, mysterious change in the reader: just a few
words then make reality more fascinating than it was before
their reading.

... Kerry Wendell Thornley

First of all, *shut up.* Neuron waterfall, line one. Rivuletic feeling,
Dakini fastens dew bokeh as ankle bells to shiver Delight's pelt,
burly sigh-torus barkless & calignous in musty linden's cool ring.

Raise my calf like a kukri, my thigh like it's fucking time, hypotenuse
in space, opposite to the angel. Of the left leg, let sin plant its limb
like a sole fairy candle spike. I behold the fat lil cute pyre of mine.
I could doom out at any time. Open lips as a
labial garters put slitprint on the scroll like a tan-fleshed butterfly.
Aura iit, a beacon type Vaginal Mavis, these poutine-ass Jacob's

Ladder social climbing wannabe senators pussy, bad poets, lowkey
racist. Each opportunity I make, I slam the door in their faces.

A graphite pencil shades & a diamond with no glare is glass with no flair.
I push the eraser to get the lead out & bury the lede right there.

Let's get back to my path. I feel my skin boil & I waver sometimes.

Now, I simmer in the leaves & petals like the wind through the sunny glade.

Twin vitarka mudra in fourth position, give attitude & seal it.

To hold the blood from flowing down my nose, I look at the sky these days.

I'll never stop it. Let its lightning paint me as clouds clot the color pain.

Every hurt I ever got, from tip to hilt of blade, I took staring straight.

I want you bastards to see my cornea's chakram gleam. You won't kill me,

& that's either on the spit on their head, or upon their head on a spit.

I orb bubbles: a dollop of breath, nymphet's placid lymph, spot of acid.

To look for enlightenment on the trine of the clear sphere, light's window.

Pop goes pop, tramp stamps, claps & stomps, eudaemonia & daemonorops.

In cicatrices, my subject field of an orphic score écorché
postcard from a paradise in flames. Cicimifuga. Observe the fresh

PANTYCLINES CALCIFEROUS IN TATTED LACE, REMOVE THE FRAMEWORK & SEE
brands made beneath satin weight of elastic bands & chemical embrace.

You may ask, what ever does it mean to seek happiness despite hellscape?

Well, on one hand, think of each type an elated crash, a chance blossom.

On the other hand, it means constant training, arming yourself & your friends.

On the other hand, to see the pencil sharpener as a conch of which the word spirals out. On the other hand, to know the limit between song

& lyric is less like border & more like trellis. On the other hand, to do wavetable synthesis based on the volutes of her tresses. On the other hand, to

notice bullet wounds in the bottoms of blueberries. On the other

to tear through a comfort character's dumpling face, like Pochacco, & know it's gore is not its own. Less cute animals die worse to sustain our lives.

On the other hand, to take the rainbow palina of CDs & spread

them on black bread like fig mint jam. On the other hand, to smoke tear gas in

the streets like a Sobranie Cocktail or a Capri. On the other hand,

to win a staring duel versus a baby. On the other hand, the Molotov

ember plumes from the bottle pit like brunettes growing out roots of blonde dye.

On the other hand, to play a warm trauma nurse in age of endless

riage, to take a globe vial filled with water to magnify her wound &

thread a vanishing smile. On the other hand, moist the text by the neck from

the apical palace balustrade, watch, like Ranma, the genre change.

On the other hand, the wax bloom on plums invisible to the touch like

ghost plush conceals the atmosphere on a bruised pianisphere. On the other

hand, to condensate absence's hunger in a drawn sign from flesh to pane.

On the other hand, a palm full of little bone crepuscules rid for the

heteroclitics. On the other hand, a coral snake contorts in soapwort.

On the other hand, the stolen land is returned by popular demand.

On the other hand, a woman with a "Utopia" tattoo on the

nape of her neck just below her severe bob massages its ink on

spinal knob. On the other hand, your ampersand in time. On the other

hand, periodically nothing but fucking, & on the other hand, fucking

nothing. On the other hand, sol-ity-quys, sprint hopping on each mote of

dust in a sunbeam, & falling in love like quicksand. On the other hand,

I take my pinky, scratch my scalp, watch it spread like sakura into the

April 4:43. On the other hand, look, Aristilde Kirby,

dead on the wheel of her own desire again. On the other hand, an eclipse,

a new life in reincantation. On the other hand, tell my exes

to solve for why "forever" takes more effort on their end. On the other

hand, here's 27 arms, to make it even, yeah? O, the other and:

model chrysanthemum, open hug shards in the flood plane.

Bark! It's for you.

Follow

Follow

Original audio

Fol

chicken nugg...

x3

me
N000000

studio

cobinbean
Nooooo0000

serowejeze
vise

Follow

Follo

if u read this u r gay

will harrison

I had just finished teaching a room of college freshman about the rhetorical correlation between logos, ethos, and pathos when I saw the video from Utah Valley University. No, not the video you're thinking of.

In this one, a young man addresses his audience, his eggplant-shaped head adorned with shiny, visor-like sunglasses, a blue hat emblazoned with a white 'S,' and a carefully groomed pencil mustache. "It's your boy Eldertiktok," he shouts. "There was just a gunshot, at Charlie Kirk, we're in Utah . . . this is not a joke." For a split second, the camera flits away from his face, tracking a horde of scrambling spectators. And then he turns his phone back upon himself, raising it high in the air so that he can strike a positively pouty fish gape pose before breaking into a full-fledged grin and letting his tongue waggle and slide along his lower lip. "It's your boy Eldertiktok," he says again, calmer this time. "I am not playing witchall, make sure you go to church on Sunday, read the Book of Mormon, this is not a drill." On he goes, begging us to pray, turning his hat backwards, cocking it slightly, and imploring us to follow his page, before throwing up a peace sign.

Within hours, the original video had been deleted, scrubbed from the internet,

and Eldertiktok had been virtually black-listed, his just as hastily posted, tear-stained apology video ridiculed, most of his accounts—TikTok, Twitch, and Instagram—blocked or made private. It didn't help that on X, a screenshot confirmed that he'd walked up to the empty tent in which Charlie Kirk had been brutally slain and grabbed a few handfuls of (presumably) blood-soaked Turning Point USA merch. But for a moment, he'd been an oracle, a symptom of and a symbol for our time, a conduit that allowed the medium and the message to collapse upon themselves in a display of spectacular banality.

Meanwhile, I was desperate for more. I wanted to get to know this indiscreet young man, who surely wasn't much older than my students. Sure enough, when I typed "Eldertiktok" into Google, I quickly found the one account of his that hadn't been purged or banned for whatever reason: his YouTube channel. And what I found surprised me, not so much for its edgy content as for its relative innocuousness and obscurity. "Mental health is fake? Watch to find out!" (463 views). "Other churches are FAKE?! Which ones are real??" (383 views). There was one video entitled "Polynesian Culture is TOXIC!...When it

comes to S*xual Ab*se," that had over 18,000 views, and this stopped me in my tracks. In it, Eldertiktok sat with another Polynesian TikToker named Zabrina Peters and the two of them discussed motherhood, mental health, anxiety, depression, shame, generational trauma, and sexual abuse. "The biggest problem in Polynesian culture right now is we're not talking. At all," said Eldertiktok at the end of the video. It was a moment of genuine vulnerability that sliced through the algorithmic incoherence. I felt relief. I felt narrative possibility. "I kind of think I like Eldertiktok??" I confessed to an especially online close friend.

Unlike the majority of posters, who seemed pearl-clutchingly offended by Eldertiktok's behavior, I found my own emotional response to be relatively pliable, like a glob of mercury leaking from a broken thermometer. Just as the out-sized, hagiographic reaction to Charlie Kirk's gory demise felt alienating and imprecise, so did the almost exclusively one-note takes on Eldertiktok. It was easy to assume things about Eldertiktok, to ascribe him with labels—villain, clown, grifter—that felt inadequate.

The man I'd encountered on YouTube wasn't a right-wing troll but a blurry bundle of unrelated signifiers:

a clout-chasing, self-help espousing, Utah-based Polynesian Mormon who occasionally adopted a blaccent and seemed to be attracted to Kirk's event less because of Kirk's exact views and more because of his big-tent, "prove me wrong," capitalist-striver atmosphere. Not quite extremist, not quite harmless, and seemingly assembled from random parts, some of which felt surprisingly sincere, he was an ideal mascot for our "horseshoe era," a moment of peak narrative incohesion.

If Eldertiktok reveals how quickly we impose labels on scrambled ambiguity, Kirk's alleged assassin, Tyler Robinson, shows us just how far that impulse can go, illustrating our desire to force ideological coherence onto a young man whose act was wildly consequential but may have been void of clear motive. He is a Discord-surfing son of Trump voters who dropped out of Utah State University after one semester, played pornographic video games like *Furry Shades of Gay*, and carved memed-out messages like "Notices bulge OwO what's this?" and "If you Read / This, You Are / GAY / Imao" into the bullet casings he would then fire from his grandfather's Mauser model 98.

It makes sense that the masses—both mainstream and decidedly

nonconformist—assumed that Robinson was a “Groyper,” or acolyte of Kirk’s archrival, the white nationalist live streamer Nick Fuentes. Fuentes, perhaps the biggest beneficiary of Kirk’s death due to the dizzying amount of exposure it has garnered him, is both mainstream and nonconformist himself, a self-styled outsider who’s been banned from YouTube but has 524,000 followers on the streaming platform Rumble, from which he posts near nightly fire-side chats with titles like “Americans Are SICK of the Jewish lobby” and “It’s Time To Demythologize Hitler and The Holocaust.” Like Charlie Kirk, he hails from the Chicago suburbs, dropped out of college, and has assembled a rabid, rapidly expanding legion of supporters, mostly disaffected young men looking for one-shot answers to society’s shortcomings. His ideology has always been slightly more fringe than Kirk’s normie conservatism: while Kirk’s views on sundry topics like gay rights, trans rights, Islam, and affirmative action grew increasingly chauvinistic as the 2020s wore on, Fuentes trafficked in flagrant xenophobia from the start, diverging from conventional right-wing orthodoxy mainly in his vehement opposition to Israel, a stance rooted in his America

First logic that resonates with young men increasingly inclined to assemble their politics à la carte.

What a beautiful time to be teaching required freshman English. On my way to class, I would flit between my lesson plans and my phone, bouncing from Joan Didion’s thoughts on social performance to videos of a cyborgian Charlie Kirk being awoken by Alex Jones in the dead of night before flying over a frozen tundra. I felt almost hypocritical asking my students to aim for rhetorical clarity as we all watched the world play its endless game of Mad Libs. “We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” they read out loud, but nobody knew who Sharon Tate was, or Huey Newton, and the stories we were telling ourselves had become increasingly incoherent. The world inside my phone was mocking the principles inside my classroom, and I was caught in the middle, feeling too green to establish authority and too ancient to keep up. When one of my students asked me how old I was, and another added that I had “Gen Z vibes,” I couldn’t help but laugh out loud. This was not the paradoxical lens I’d asked them to look through.

Of course, there were moments when the kids—and even the project of ongoing literacy—seemed quite

alright. James Baldwin still invoked an almost pious reverence. A discussion of John Berger’s musings on “publicity images” yielded incisive observations about surveillance-generated advertising before drifting toward unchecked admiration for early 2000s Nickelodeon commercials. One student, a journalism major, approached me about the Didion essay I’d assigned, leaving me feeling vindicated about my tendency to teach extensively researched but inventively written nonfiction, which always seemed to contain more pathos and ethos than logos-tinged argument. Still, I was worried that most students felt overwhelmed by the uncertainty that fueled this sort of essay. It was telling that their most promising moments usually occurred in one-on-one conversations and not during group discussions—how were they to practice often-embarrassing inquiry and flexible modes of analysis when they all had access to personalized, antisocial chatbots that quickly, privately, and decisively answered their most uncomfortable questions?

Almost my entire teaching career had transpired during the Israeli occupation’s seemingly unending genocidal siege of Gaza, and it was unspeakably chilling to watch the American surveillance

Charlie Kirk shot in Utah



apparatus turn upon and then literally disappear student activists like Mahmoud Kahlil and Rûmeysa Öztürk. The same campus environment that birthed the student intifada was also the laboratory in which Charlie Kirk established and built Turning Point USA, "the most organized, active, and powerful conservative grassroots activist network" known to man, with chapters at more than 3,500 colleges and universities. Though Turning Point doesn't appear all that "organized" during the Erika Kirk era, prioritizing pomp and pyrotechnics, beneath the clout-concerned, tear-stained circus act rests a very real, very tangible goal: to pummel America's youth with exceedingly conservative values, whether "irl" or with a bevy of short-form videos. Scattershot efforts, carried out at a national scale, have produced scattershot but decisive results: even if many of TPUSA's college-age content consumers don't necessarily fit into tidy ideological boxes, they have definitely been influenced by what they've watched.

Academia is once again doubling as both battleground and stage. In November in Berkeley, as Kirk's phantom "American Comeback" tour made its final stopover, Rob Schneider, the event's replacement headliner, thanked "Antifa

for the welcoming," referring to protesters as "goons" who had "infiltrated academia." Despite so-called Antifa being more of a decentralized ideology than a tangible bogeyman, the university still capitulated readily, condemning "attempts to use violence or intimidation to prevent lawful expression or chill free speech," an affordance notably not extended to international students advocating for Palestinian self-determination.

Some nights, when I was alone in my apartment, I found myself morbidly drawn to chauvinistic streamers like Fuentes, who seemed to be instigating and celebrating the total wreckage of reason. I told myself it was for class, for historical context, for Eldertiktok. I wanted to write about these men, to discard my avoidance, to face down my fear of becoming transformed by the people I was watching. The only problem was I didn't know where to start. There were so many streams, and they were all so long. I watched Nick Fuentes scowl and scoff and facepalm and decline to denounce Hitler; I watched a balding Myron Gaines scold and smirk and tell a table of women that he could go cheat on his (completely hypothetical) "wife, come back, and love her the same"; I watched Myron and Sneako watch Candace Owens watching

footage of the tunnels beneath a synagogue six blocks from my apartment; I watched the Nelk boys bungle an interview with Benjamin Netanyahu; I watched the Nelk boys talk to Sneako and Myron and Hasan Piker about bungling an interview with Benjamin Netanyahu; I talked to the one person in my life who is young enough to know who the Nelk boys are and he told me they're "washed" now; I watched Adin Ross betting on blackjack with Drake, and I watched Adin Ross fail to pronounce the word "fascist."

Each time I pressed play, my stomach would kickflip and my skin would crawl and I'd wonder if I was doing the "right" research, pausing the extended, never-ending videos almost at random, not quite sure what I should try to catch in my butterfly net. I desperately wanted to pin everything down and label it before I could absorb or critique it, maybe so that I wouldn't stand a chance at absorbing it, let alone critiquing it. I was doing exactly what I lamented my students were doing.

What do we lose when curiosity and conversation are replaced with completely passive, unidirectional consumption? The braindead opportunists I was watching were addressing the much-hyped male motivational crisis by streaming into eternity, by spewing the

same bile over and over in an endlessly administered and only slightly modified slurry. *This could be it*, I thought, *a new nightly ritual*; you could drown yourself in media and still never get to the bottom of the well, reaching for signifiers as they float past, assembling them into something that feels like an ideology but lacks causal logic. When I paused one video, an especially sordid episode of “Fresh & Fit,” I got a pop-up ad from ReachOut New York. “Feeling Overwhelmed?” it asked. “You’re not alone.” It was as if a magnet was pulling me toward the lowest common denominator through entropy and sheer exposure time. “Fascism is quite literally birthed inside a cramped and carpeted dorm room,” I typed. “Fascism is birthed when lonely people try to speed-run connection and become part of a cresting wave they know to be bigger than themselves.”

Around this time, in early November, Joel Towers, president of the New School (and recipient of a high six-figure salary), announced that the university would be undergoing a drastic “reconstruction,” a haphazard effort to curb its well-publicized financial shortcomings. 40 percent of full-time faculty received coercive “voluntary separation” buyouts and several “low demand” academic majors

were “indefinitely discontinued” without explanation. It wasn’t just Turning Point USA storming the gates; an institution that had once been a bastion of analytical thought had slashed its history department, capitulating to the same contextless, à la carte absurdity I’d been tracking online. While Kirk’s people claimed to defend “free speech” on campuses, the actual infrastructure for historical perspective was being dismantled from within.

Back in the classroom, I felt like I was keeping a corrosive secret. How do you teach empathy or ethical responsibility when the dominant modes are distraction, detachment, self-promotion, and speed? History was racing through my phone like a horse without a jockey and I was practically begging my students to slow down—to eschew the express-delivered convenience of LLMs, to practice research, close reading, and critical analysis, to prioritize curiosity, associative connections, and casual conversation.

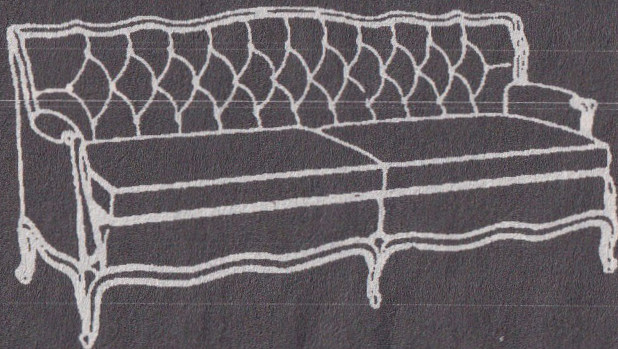
In September, when I’d heard about the missives that Tyler Robinson carved into his bullets, I immediately jumped back to being bullied in middle school, thinking, “If you read *at all*, you are gay.” Even though I’d thought—as I rewatched clips of Eldertiktok or searched for clues

about Robinson—that I wanted clarity and order and cleanly-applied labels, I was beginning to realize that I needed to re-shape my logic and reconsider the meandering, spiraling, oblong forms I admired as a reader, teacher, and writer. These forms insist that you hold contradictions long enough for connections to emerge organically, insist that you reject instant algorithmic associations, insist that you undertake the much slower work of watching one idea complicate another. In an era when reading itself can feel indulgent, I needed to remind myself that it would only be through sustained attention that I could retain any thematic undergirding, any defense against a world that had abandoned causality entirely. In myself and in my students and in Eldertiktok and in us all watching ourselves watch Eldertiktok, I cannot unsee how a desire for coherence is an expression of grief. ☹

Muebles el Canario

[Lovebird Furniture]

Felisberto Hernandez



The publicity for this furniture took me by surprise. I had been spending a month's vacation at a nearby resort, not wanting to know what was going on in town. When I got back it was very hot and that same night I went to the beach. I returned to my room fairly early and in a bit of a bad mood because of what had happened to me on the trolley. I had caught the trolley at the beach and found a spot on a bench facing the aisle. Because it was still very hot, I had folded my jacket on my lap, and since I was wearing a short-sleeved shirt – my arms were bare. Suddenly one of the persons going by in the aisle leaned over me and said:

"With your permission, please."

I said at once, "It's yours."

But by then – already too late – I was frightened. In a flash several things had happened. The first was that even before he had finished asking for my permission or I'd had a chance to answer, the man was already rubbing something cold – for some reason it felt like spit – on my bare arm. And by the time I'd finished saying "It's yours," I had felt a needle prick and seen the large syringe with letters on it.

At the same time, a fat woman across the aisle had said: "I'm next."

I must have jerked my arm because the man with the needle said: "Careful or it'll hurt. Just hold still."

In a minute he withdrew the needle and the passengers all around me were smiling: they had seen my face - he started rubbing on the arm of the fat woman, who watched appreciatively. I noticed the large syringe squirted only a small amount of liquid, the plunger bouncing right back out. Then I read the yellow letters down the side: LOVEBIRD FURNITURE. I was too embarrassed to ask what the injection was for and decided to find out the next day from the newspapers. But the moment I got off the trolley I thought, "It can't be a tonic - it has to be something with an immediate visible effect if it's really a promotional stunt." I still couldn't figure out how it would work, but I was very tired and made up my mind to ignore it. In any case, I was confident the Lovebird people wouldn't be allowed to dope the public with some drug. Before going to sleep I wondered whether they might be trying to induce a state of physical pleasure or well-being. I was still awake when I heard a birdsong inside me. It didn't have the quality of a remembered sound or one reaching you from the outside. It felt

abnormal, like a new disease, but with an ironic twist to it as well, as if the disease were happy and had started to sing. These sensations soon wore off and were followed by something more concrete: a voice - also ringing in my head - that said: "Hello, hello, this is your Lovebird station Hello, and welcome to our special broadcast. The persons sensitized to these transmissions..." and so on.

I heard all this standing barefoot by my bed, without daring to turn on the light. I had jumped out of bed and frozen on the spot: I couldn't believe the sounds were in my head. I dropped back in bed, waiting to see what would happen next. The voice was giving instructions for buying Lovebird Furniture on the installment plan. Then suddenly it said: "And now stay tuned for our first selection, the tango..."

Desperate, I pulled a heavy blanket over my head, but that only made the sound worse because the blanket muffled the street noise and I could hear what was going on inside my head more clearly. So I threw off the blanket and started to walk up and down the room, which helped a little until I caught myself listening in secret, as if perversely determined to go on feeling sorry for myself. I got back into bed and,

hanging on to the bedstead, heard the tango again, even louder than before.

When I'd had enough, I went out searching for other sounds to block the ones in my head. I thought of buying a newspaper, looking up the radio station's address and finding out how to neutralize the effects of the injection. But a trolley went by and I got on, and soon we were going over a rough spot in the rails and the clatter and jangle relieved me of the next tango. Then, suddenly, looking around the trolley, I saw another man with a syringe: he was injecting some children in the seats facing forward. I went up and asked him what I could do to neutralize the effects of an injection I had received an hour earlier. He stared at me in amazement and said:

"You don't like our programming?"

"Absolutely not."

"If you wait a few minutes you'll catch a soap opera."

"I couldn't bear it," I said.

He went on with the injections, shaking his head and smiling. The tango was over and the voice was back with another sales pitch. Finally, the man of the injections said: "Sir, haven't you seen the ad for Lovebird pills? It's in all the papers. If you don't like our programming, you simply

take a pill and that's the end of it."

"But all the drugstores are closed at this time and I'm losing my mind!"

Just then I heard the announcer say:

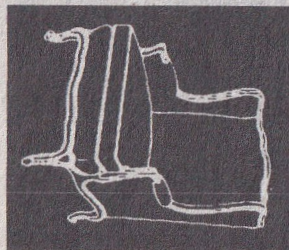
"And now for a poem entitled My Favorite Armchair?' It's a sonnet composed specially for Lovebird Furniture." Whereupon the man of the injections drew up close to me and whispered in my ear: "I can fix things for you - another way. I'll only charge you a buck: you look like I can trust you. If you give me away I lose my job, because the company would rather have people buy the pills."

I pressed him to reveal his secret and he extended his hand and said:

"Let's have the buck first."

And after I had given him the money:

"Go soak your feet in hot water." ◀



democracy IS brat



brat and it's the
same but now
we're knocking on
doors in PA for
kamala and tim



democracy IS brat



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The year is 2010; we are two years into Obama's first term, one which he has won on the promise of progress, prosperity, and above all Hope; the Internet, no longer in its infancy, has started to become the single most-used form of communication on the planet; the 2008 financial crisis has just wreaked havoc on economies all over the world; though the war on terror rages with the Iraq War still a year away from finally ending, the world is starting to brighten under the banner of long-promised "progress"; dire warnings of catastrophic climate change are starting to emerge, and their effect clearly cannot be ignored; and—despite this overwhelming mix of uncertainty towards the future—a new generation is starting to come of age, full of *cautious optimism* and a sense that they have the autonomy to change things for the better. Heralded as the death of Postmodernism and the true beginning of the 21st century, this philosophy will soon be referred to under a more recognizable denominator: Metamodernism.

"History, it seems, is moving rapidly beyond its all too easily proclaimed end,"¹ says Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in their defining 2010 paper "Notes on Metamodernism". An overabundance of notable achievements and adversities had realigned the world; given these tectonic shifts, we Americans were desperately in need of a new descriptor for the times we currently found ourselves in, and for the motivations we embodied in crafting our culture. But this proclamation—of metamodernism as the defining characteristic of the 21st century—was perhaps misguided. A decade later, the world does not reflect the hopes and dreams of the Obama era. In fact, we have made the world worse off. While this essay's aim is to reveal the true nature of the Metamodern era, it is undeniable that we find ourselves in uncharted times; I would argue that our contemporary reality is a new era distinct from Postmodernism, but the true meaning of metamodernism is far more insidious than the cautious optimism that the Obama era would allow. This force is not a benevolent change of guard as it was praised to be at the beginning of the decade, but instead the fermentation of neoliberalism leading us towards the inevitable end result of capitalism: *outright fascism*.

completely
but interestingly
also
the same
Jamison lung

but first: what is
metamodernism?

1. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of AESTHETICS & CULTURE* 2 (November 15, 2010), 2.

metamodernism & the neoliberal

"[Metamodernism] oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity."²

Metamodernism is a tough philosophy to pin down; less so defined by what it concretely is, Metamodernism instead finds definition in that which it is *between*. Unlike its philosophical predecessors (and even this is arguable), Metamodernism may be viewed less as a distinct moment or period in time, and more as a cultural system governing belief. This isn't to say that we are not in the Metamodern period more so than we are in *Modernity* or *Postmodernity*, but that these periods have never really ended. Instead each subsequent philosophy has subsumed the previous; these perspectives and systems of beliefs don't die with their practitioners, but instead are adopted, discarded, and mutated with each new generation. Metamodernism is a both/and philosophy (as Velmeulen and van den Akker describe as "both-neither"), catering to any possible demographic of believers and nonbelievers, Modernists and Postmodernists alike; metamodernism is all things to all people, in effect *meaningless*, or more insidiously it is a vessel in which *any* meaning can be placed.

Metamodernism is ultimately a personal philosophy; it is not interested or concerned in creating ideological

common ground between people, as its bounds envelop all modes of thought and feeling. Metamodernism may be wielded as a tool in which consumer capitalism can contort itself to fit within contemporary life. The "meta" prefix in this context is often defined as "between", "beyond", or "with", but more widely understood as associated with the "self" ("metadata" is data which references other data, a "meta-joke" is a joke referencing other jokes); to be "meta" in a post-digital society is to be aware of oneself within the context of society, culture, history—the world at large. While that may present itself as a moment of self-reflection, it almost universally casts the self as the center.

The conversation of metamodernism as a philosophy, outlook, or *system* of belief in this way is completely sidelined by an obsession over *individual* belief. To be metamodern doesn't require that you believe in anything in particular, but that you are someone who does *believe* (earnestness), or at least believe that you don't believe (apathy); that you are an individual with the agency to *choose*. It is easy, then, to see how metamodernism as a cultural philosophy partners so easily with Neoliberal consumerism—call it *value* instead.

"Widespread economization of heretofore noneconomic domains, activities, and subjects, but not necessarily marketization or monetization of them, then, is the distinctive signature of neoliberal rationality."³

—Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos*

Neoliberalism as a system of power imposes the will of economics onto

3. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville Books, 2020), 31-32.

2. Velmeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," 5-6.

all aspects of existence; that is, Neoliberalism truncates all things into binary markers of worth which can be compared and exploited indefinitely, regardless of what they are. Neoliberalism holds above all else the concepts of infinite growth, privatization, and extreme individualism as the key tenets of a successful and productive society. While a liberal democracy espouses the rights of the individual to make decisions free from the will or arbitrary influence of another—what some might call *liberty*—neoliberalism views that privilege of decision as only the means towards value accumulation. It is the invisible hand of the market that drives all decision making under a Neoliberal order; all actions are structured around their ability to generate *value*, all individuals based on their contribution to expanding market demographics. Under neoliberalism, the will of the corporate conglomerate—the will to endlessly accumulate *value*—has been imposed upon the individual as a form of meaning in which life should be structured towards. In fact, neoliberalism is uninterested in actual *meaning*; if everything in existence is viewed within a binary of economic value, then it does not matter what politics or opinions individual things hold. All that matters is that the object *exists* in the world at all; that even the mere *act of existing* allows neoliberalism to extract some type of value. As Wendy Brown says: "Whether through social media 'followers,' 'likes,' and 'retweets,' through rankings and ratings for every activity and domain, or through more directly monetized practices, the pursuit of education, training, leisure, reproduction, consumption, and more are increasingly configured as strategic decisions and practices related to enhancing the self's future value."⁴

Neoliberalism is a self-justifying system: in order to maintain the consumer-capitalist market and continue the endless accumulation of resources, a neoliberal system must create social structures which encourage and coerce subjected individuals into participating within that system; this in turn leads to those subjected—in the absence of real agency or alternatives for survival—to conflate their lives around these artificial structures (mass media, credit ratings, celebrity, consumer culture, investment banking, the list is endless). These structures are so ingrained into our conception of life, that any alternatives have been rendered completely unimaginable.

Neoliberalism is a form of totalitarianism—but instead of subservience to a single supreme being or state, neoliberalism worships the intangible force of the market; and despite neoliberalism's feigned emphasis on individualism, the neoliberal individual is almost powerless to those arbitrary market forces. "The whole acts as one market, not because any of its members survey the whole field, but because their limited individual fields of vision sufficiently overlap so that through many intermediaries the relevant information is communicated to all."⁵

It is here that we start to feel the peculiar echoes of fascism.



4. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 34.

5. F.A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *The American Economic Review* 35, no. 4 (1945): 519–30, 526.

metamodernism & the individual

I use the term fascism to refer to latent tendencies, whether they be political or aesthetic, of which anything can possess to some degree. These tendencies—strategies, desires, actions, opinions, symbols, and so on—share key notions despite being plentiful and ever-expanding. Classically, these tendencies (“fascist aesthetics”) are associated with violent patriarchy—of extreme bigotry, violence, humiliation, dehumanization, hyper-masculinity—but also of intense desire, of extreme self-obsession, of “life as art”. I will quote Benito Mussolini extensively throughout; as the father of fascism, he above all fascist leaders of the 20th century expresses fascism as an ideal and aesthetic—speaking to fascism not only as policy but as artistry, as life itself. To think of these tendencies as static or fixed within one historical conception would be naive—Mussolini would oppose “this notion [as running] counter to experience which teaches that life is in continual flux and in process of evolution.”⁶ Fascism is always changing, always redefining, always finding a new way to sustain itself; as Mussolini ordains, “fascism is not only a system of government but also and above all a system of thought.”⁷ The fascist—viewing himself above all—does what he wants, exerting his desire onto the world and contorting it to fit his vision. “Fascism is totalitarian, and the Fascist State—a synthesis and a unit inclusive of all values—interprets, develops, and potentiates the whole life of a people.”⁸ Fascism seeks to structure and limit all possibilities outside the narrow vision it has constructed. Under a fascist regime, one is not an individual

6. Benito Mussolini, “The Doctrine of Fascism,” (1932), 2.

7. Mussolini, “The Doctrine of Fascism,” 1.

8. Mussolini, “The Doctrine of Fascism,” 2.

but part of the mass of bodies who sacrifice themselves for the strength of the State. “When the masses are like wax in my hands, when I stir their faith, or when I mingle with them and am almost crushed by them, I feel myself to be a part of them. All the same there persists in me a certain feeling of aversion, like that which the modeler feels for the clay he is moulding. Does not the sculptor sometimes smash his block of marble into fragments because he cannot shape it into the vision he has conceived?”⁹

I will not mince words: fascism is not the consequence of neoliberalism, nor is it in any way opposing neoliberalism—they are in fact one and the same. While a classical fascist doctrine preaches the collective and depersonalizing strength of the mass, that relationship of power requires a central personality in whose desires the masses contort around. But while a fascist individual may be beholden to the depersonalizing power of the State and its central authority, they are deputized to exert that power within their own daily lives. Edwin Dwyer, a writer and prominent member of the SS, relates an anecdote about Freikorps General Oskar von Watter, who led army regiments against workers’ rebellions in the Ruhr in March 1920: “A soldier is placed in my charge by the state. It is theft from that state when he performs work for anyone other than me!”¹⁰ Under American consumer-capitalism, our allegiance lies not within a supreme leader or centralized power per se (il duce, mein führer, The State)—but instead within ourselves. Neoliberalism is a privatized fascism, in which each individual is their own sovereign fulfilling material desire and amassing resources—

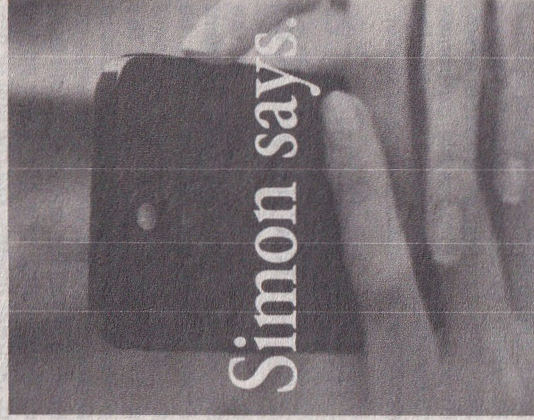
9. “The Theory and Practice of Fascism,” *Fascism: An Anthology*, edited by Nathanael Greene, 73–113. (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1968), 82.

10. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies Vol. 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 62.

wealth, objects, attention, lust—but is ultimately powerless within the gravity of the free market. Our decision-making is beholden to the power of the market economy; but much like the fascist individual, who despite being beholden to the power of the State may exert their individual desires in its name, we too are compelled by the higher force of the market to fulfill our own desires. The intense privatization of American culture under neoliberalism gives the illusion that control over one's life lies within the hands of the consumer—conflating the act of consuming as expressing a freedom of choice. Neoliberal consumerism, as with fascism, aims to impose meaning and a sense of identity onto the lives of a subject where perhaps none existed before.

A recent Samsung commercial [as of writing in November 2024] illustrates this notion: the commercial, titled “Simon Says”, pokes fun at the yearly tech upgrade cycle which has become commonplace in contemporary consumer society. Throngs of young millennials dressed in the same shade of drab beige wait in line at an Apple Store (suggested without being named), mindlessly scrolling on their iPhones as a woman narrates: “Simon says ‘Think Different’, but not too different. Simon Says ‘stay in line’. Simon says ‘upgrade again’. Simon says ‘limit your choices’”. Finally the Samsung user appears on screen, dressed in sparkles and colors and brandishing Samsung’s latest tech innovation—“Simon says a lot of things. Samsung says do your own thing!”, as if implying that moving from one globally-dominating tech company’s product to another globally-dominating tech company’s nearly-identical product suddenly gives the consumer true agency and individualization, or even that this change of brands would free them

of the yearly upgrade cycle that both gain from. [This is to say nothing of the fact that these “Samsung users” in the commercial are both woman of color, one a Black woman and the other a Spanish-speaking woman, while the iPhone users portrayed are largely white and East Asian—demonstrating the cynically modern tendency to capitalize off of race and gender as signifiers of “uniqueness”—a modern Orientalism—further entrenching us within identity politics as means of distraction]. In some ways this commercial is a reference to Apple’s now-infamous 1984 Macintosh commercial: a brightly-colored blonde woman smashes the massive TV screen being used to brainwash the masses of a colorless dystopia, implying that choosing Apple brand computers will set you free from some sort of depersonalizing fascist dictatorship. We are promised that individual consumer choice is what sets us each apart from each other, bestows upon us identity and agency, and above all freedom from tyranny—an oh-so-American ideal.



This hyper-individualism is a core tenet of metamodern philosophy, clearly a remnant of Postmodern avant-garde intellectuals who saw personal expression as the gateway to cultural enlightenment ("turn on, tune in, drop out", or more aptly "change your hair, change your life"). Artist Stefan Eins: "...[leading postmodern art collective Collaborative Projects] brought on the end of Modern Art and Modernism. Cohesive groups like Colab in previous generations created in styles like Cubism, Surrealism, Pop Art, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and other movements. Not any longer. Colab members in the '70s and now create in their own individual styles. [Colab] represented the end of Modernism and Modern Art and brought in a new area of openness: Contemporary Art."¹¹

Eins introduces—in an almost-phenetic way—the key tenet of belief within a metamodern consumer society: that to be considered a part of culture doesn't require that you conform to any predisposition; that you should not be reflecting culture, but that culture should in fact reflect you. Metamodernism, which by now may come to refer to the totalizing maturation of Neoliberalism, cherry-picks the worst aspects of these Modern and Postmodern ideologies; a citizen of the post-digital society is both an individual consumer of their own interest AND a faceless statistic subsumed within the masses of capital. Here we are again confronted with this paradoxical "both-and": extreme self-obsession pushes us towards utter alienation. Our hyper-individualist culture folds in on itself; we seek belonging so desperately that we trade away the power of real decision-making. Where neoliberalism as a whole aims to control *action*, metamodernism

is a tool within the neoliberal arsenal in which to control *belief*. This is the ultimate goal of Neoliberalism: to potentiate all possible outcomes toward that which is most beneficial to profit and the maintenance of power.

metamodernism & the historical

On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, political correspondent Francis Fukuyama [author's note: he is a clown] penned one of the most unfortunately influential texts of the postmodern political era, "The End of History?": "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."¹² This article, steeped within American exceptionalism, has become the stuff of postmodern Myth. The fall of the Soviet Union and the vanquishing of America's greatest enemy/ideological foil vindicated to the west the supremacy of the neoliberal world order, setting the tone for the colonial-tinged globalism that has since come to rampage through the 21st century. Post-history allows a neoliberal ruling class to not just maintain material power, but ideological power *indefinitely*.

This is the ultimate goal of neoliberalism [FASCISM]: to control the future by contorting the past and constraining the present. The Status Quo must be maintained at all costs. The field of acceptable possibilities must be narrowed until only one path is presented. This is the way it has always been and always will be. It is not so much that

11. *A Book about Colab (and Related Activities)*, (New York: Printed Matter, 2015), 67.

12. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3-18, 4.

neoliberal democracy beat communism, but more so that it removed the idea of communism from the field of possibility. *Communism* was relegated to the distant past. In a world now reflective of capitalism, it no longer seems "feasible" as something that *could* happen, and certainly not something that *should* happen. Post-history had ushered us to the top of a great many stairs, only to look upon a hallway that stretched on for eternity.

Fukuyama did not *literally* think that notable things would cease to happen, but the post-historical narrative has had an immense amount of cultural staying power. And in spite of Fukuyama's academic authoritarianism, the forced post-historical perspective is an artificial worldview; it leads us as Americans to feel almost invincible, expressing surprise and dismay at the fact that we are constantly "living through major historical events". This disconnect from reality mirrors the state of neoliberal news media: intense around-the-clock coverage almost overtakes those real events and emotional responses, moving from past [reporting on what *has happened*] to present [reporting as *they happen*] into future [manufacturing the atmosphere to *make them happen*]. The longer that we are *out* of history, the farther that history becomes. Our reality is not like it was *before*. The dangers one may have faced *then* are inaccessible to us *now*. We are disconnected from history and unable to truly relate to it in a bodily way. History becomes a zoo—a thing to be gawked at, entertained by, but trapped within the limited confines that we have erected for it.

The Digital age has created a condition in which we are not just *beyond* history, as the postmodern view of chronology is concerned, but are completely submerged within it. A metamodernist understands them-

self as a product of history, but views *themselves* as between or beyond its confines—"a life free from the limitations of time and space"¹³ according to Mussolini. They are a consumer of history, Orientalizing and fetishizing it; history is molded, distorted, reshaped to the reflection of the present—a hyper-history. Digital mass media provides an artificial playground for escape, a place where we can live out vivid and often tangible fantasies without worrying about consequence. Consumer culture is ever evolving, but never-ending; it sheds its face with each new generation, endlessly sustaining itself in order to maintain its dominance.

Many have noted that the window for nostalgia culture is shrinking—things are starting to creep closer and closer to our present, like the well is being tapped. History is a finite resource. Further and further out of reach do our lived experiences become, wrestled away from us by time and by force. Anything can become *historical*, and in turn *Mythological*.

metamodernism & the mythological

I have talked much about the cultural paradoxes of metamodernism—the both/and—but that isn't a new construction for the contemporary era. Classical Modernism is rife with paradox, founded upon it even. Modernism as an artistic movement both rejects and invokes the past; at once throwing off the suffocating blanket of Victorian imperialism, while also positioning itself within the Historical Canon. Modernists forcefully establish themselves as the vanguard of a new era, and yet derive their authority from their proximity (and antithesis) to the Historical. Many of the most heralded works of

13. Mussolini, "The Doctrine of Fascism," 1.

Modern art and literature often referenced, retooled, or reconstructed myth and tradition (Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Yeats' *The Second Coming*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*); A Modernist's desire isn't in total *dismantlement*, but in instilling their own creations with grandeur and historicism—of elevating to the *Mythological*.

In some ways, this is an artificial rebuke of the *sublime*—the Romantic notion of human's puniness in the face of the overwhelming beauty and dread of nature [DIVINE]. To the Romantics, the sublime notion was the marker of our mortality; the natural world is the image of Divine made manifest, consisting of a vastness within which humanity is just a speck. To attempt to overthrow humanity's position as *part* of nature leads only to the destruction and desecation of *all life*. This is the cautionary tale at the heart of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*—Victor's torturous reality is the terrifying consequence of man's nihilistic hubris in attempting to surpass God.

Mussolini's wax quote illustrates that point exactly: For him, he is the artist, using his creative whims to contort the faceless masses into the shape he desires to see; at once he is "almost crushed by them", lost within a power that conquers even him, as if his life is meaningless in the face of the overwhelming might of what he may consider *human nature* [I shudder]. But the sublime is *harnessed*, like a bolt of artistic expression—Mussolini is almost overtaken by the Divine, bestowed with the will to create life and to destroy it. He is overcome with violent passion but also with fear—*aversion* as he names it—of his own desire when brandishing that power. The Fascist thinks he has dominated nature, distorting Darwin's theory (Ernst Haeckel's *eugenicism*) into "historically authenticated"

legitimacy. "All of the objects and configurations of which the language of these men incessantly speaks have a definite air of fictionality about them. Historical events are experienced and reported as if in a delirium; but it is a highly controlled, selective delirium. Their feelings, their touch, their language descend on a relatively small number of densely signifying objects and configurations, each of which is invaded by, enveloped in fantasies. Once again, the process seems to resemble a defense mechanism, or, in this case, a safety device. Of all the multiplicity of details and contradictions reality offers, they extract so few, and almost always the same ones, that their 'choice' appears as a compulsion."¹⁴

A fascist ideology is not *genuine* in that it has no historical grounding. It instead twists the historical, mythological, and inherently "natural" (that thing which gives a work, idea, or entity its so-called "authority" as *real*), using it to justify its continued dominance. "The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced."¹⁵ Fascism, as Mussolini would declare, "preserves what may be described as "the acquired facts' of history."¹⁶ Walter Benjamin would call this *reproduction*—the mechanical process of stripping away the *aura* of a work in order to capture its visualized *aesthetic*—something only possible, he points out, with the technological innovations of the Industrial Revolution and the hubris afforded to men as a result. "For fascism, the discovery and restoration of Roman ruins was mainly 'symbolic archeology', inspired

14. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, 88.

15. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, 217–52, (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 221.

16. Mussolini, "The Doctrine of Fascism," 7.

by a mythical attraction towards a 'sacred centre' and a desire to come into contact with its 'magical power'.¹⁷ Those pieces, "genuine" in the sense that they are recognizably connected to a past that once did exist, are stripped of their original meaning and context; they are reconstructed to fit a present narrative, "reproduced" as a facsimile of the original sharing its appearance but lacking the authoritative aura of being real. *"Does not the sculptor sometimes smash his block of marble into fragments because he cannot shape it into the vision he has conceived?"*

metamodernism & the pop-cultural

"Without a historical perspective, such connoisseurship prepares the way for a curiously absentminded acceptance of propaganda for all sorts of destructive feelings, feelings whose implications people are refusing to take seriously,"¹⁸

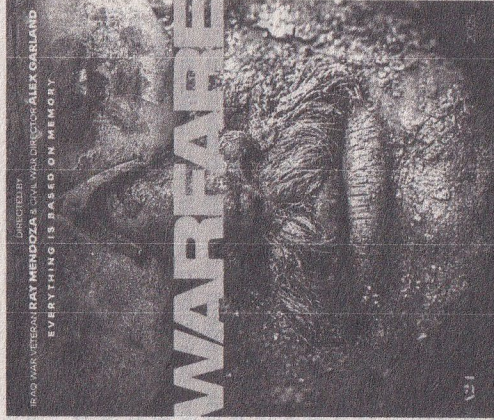
—Susan Sontag, *Fascinating Fascism*

If postmodernism exists within the post-historical, then metamodernism is the *apocryphal*; that is to say doubtfully authentic, artificial; Metamodernism presents us with a *present*, and in turn *future*, that is unfolding only through sheer force alone.

It may surprise no one that the United States is no stranger to revisionism, in fact viewing the practice as necessary to sustaining the nation. The 1950s saw the two-fold distortion of history and culture (nothing new

17. Ennio Gentile, "Fascism as Political Religion," *Journal of Contemporary History* 25, no. 2/3 (1990): 229–51, 245.

18. Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *Under the Sign of Saturn*, 73–108 (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 97.

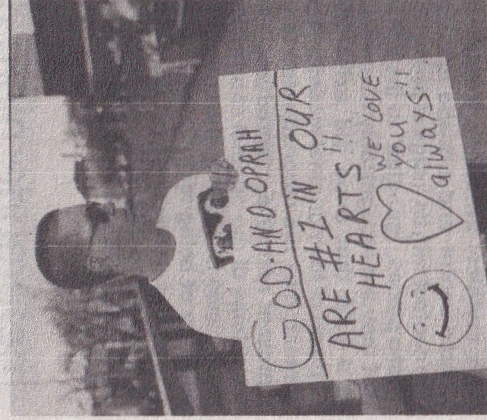


at the time but integral to setting up the Postmodern sensibility). On one hand, the film industry (the creators of American myth) remade the American West into a shining silver screen symbol of US legitimacy *in the past*. On the other hand, the US (covertly through CIA influence) exported such contemporary *American* cultural forms as Abstract Expressionism around the globe, using these artistic movements as a symbol of the innovation, freedom of expression, and prosperity which was supposedly attainable to the individual under American capitalism *in the present*. These cultural myths set the groundwork for contemporary American life starting with the Eisenhower era. This image of the 1950s would later become mythologized itself as the blueprint of American exceptionalism—the high watermark of "civil" American society *in the future*. The defining characteristic of Reagan's presidency was his desire to "return" to this societal myth portrayed nostalgically through Norman Rockwell paintings. After so-called "high art" movements of the postmodern era gave legitimacy to American

19. Gentile, "Fascism as Political Religion", 247.

pop culture, it became the most recognizable and most venerated cultural production within which those same American ideals could be espoused. If "[the fascism of Mussolini] entrusted the materialization of its myth to the architectural world,"¹⁹ then American Neoliberalism makes known its dominance through mass media.

A postmodern pop culture—in contrast to the "high culture" of Modernism—is non-exclusive, plural, "democratized"; that which is popular is popular because *the people want it to be*. Pop culture is the *new*—its creation in the mid 20th century initially reflected the burgeoning mass production of a post-industrial society; pop culture is *safe*—it is a fantasy land made for entertainment and escapism, it exists outside reality and the realm of politic, it is pure aesthetic and therefore unreal; pop culture is *plastic*—unnatural, spread everywhere, designed to be used and thrown away. Just like the metamodel individual, mass media sees itself as no longer part of the stream of history—no longer as a contributor to the world, but merely a spectator pointing out the things we wish to see.



"The pop culture lionized by young adults of the nineties was often based on a myth: the dogmatic belief that things they'd loved as children had always been appreciated with adult minds... To classify this as simple 'nostalgia' isn't quite accurate, because the process was proactive and methodical; the goal, it seemed, was to increase the intellectual value of bygone consumer art in order to make it match the emotional resonance that had been there all along."²⁰

—Chuck Klosterman, *The Nineties*

Postmodern pop culture was never intended to have the staying power that it ended up having, but there was plenty of money to be made by maintaining its memory. Within the metamodel era, we have seen the complete canonization of consumer goods to the level of near-religious veneration. The cultural creations of the 20th century have entered into the realm of tradition, and have become venerated for their recognizability and the emotional connection that they elicit from a consuming audience. One can say that our culture today is a simulacra, a copy of a copy. The religiously-guarded pop media of the digital age is built upon an unstable stage, teetering towards total collapse. This culture is a pastiche of the inherently disposable pop media from the postmodern era, which was itself a distortion of the "high culture" of the modern era. This process could be described as *model collapse*, a term used in AI research to describe the destruction of an AI model when trained with data that was created already by an AI; nonsense begetting

²⁰ Chuck Klosterman, *The Nineties*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2022), 242–43.

nonsense [we are so far from Benjamin's *aura*].

This view of mass media is in line with its current, suffocating trend: the biopic/remake/sequel/multiverse wasteland. The biopic/remake/sequel/multiverse moves past nostalgic pastiche; unlike something like *American Graffiti* or *Barry Lydon* (all directed by so-called "auteurs") which attempts to obsessively capture a period of time as accurately as possible despite the obvious impossibility, the biopic/remake/sequel/multiverse looks to reinvent its subject for a contemporary consciousness, reflecting the politics and social mores of the present instead of an accurate representation of the past, which again is impossible. While we can argue about the artistic merit of individual works, the existence of an entire industry centered around the recycling of recognizable culture betrays a broader trend: that of cultural control. Under classical fascism, this might be called *total culture*—as Mussolini says "a synthesis and a unit inclusive of all values," one that "interprets, develops, and potentiates the whole life of a people."²¹ Though these media types differ in subject and approach, they all maintain a grip—what one might see as "official", "definitive", "canonical"—on our media, and with it our identities, our cultural history, our *actual* history. The biopic maintains an authority over a historical narrative *of the past*; the remake maintains the legacy of cultural institutions *in the present*; the multiverse, which through its format can account for any number of possibilities, potentiates what is possible *in the future*. As Fukuyama says: "In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history."²²

The Barbenheimer phenomenon of summer 2023 is perhaps the most oversaturated example of this level of all-encompassing control under neoliberal consumerism.

For context—two movies were scheduled to be released in theaters together on July 21st 2023: Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, and Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*. After each separately announced their release date, the internet latched onto the idea that these two movies, differing in tone almost completely, were somehow interlinked through the sheer absurdity of their mingling. The phenomena took on a life of its own, moving past the two movie-objects, overtaking the cultural zeitgeist and setting the stage for a never-before-realized level of fully-saturating viral marketing.

One movie is (purportedly) a feigned gesture at women's liberation dressed in brightly colored, highly saturated, and easily consumable set dressing; the other is a bleak historical parable of the creation of the most destructive weapon known to humanity. They end up having more commonalities under the surface though; both are high-budget blockbusters aimed at getting people back into the theater after the long slog of Covid lockdowns; both

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We'll always be together....I promise.



21. Mussolini, "The Doctrine of Fascism," 2.

22. Fukuyama, "The End of History?," 18.



narratives purport to have a moral implication or obligation; both have a parade of instantly, recognizably contemporary stars, many playing minuscule cameos with one (or even no) lines. Both *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* reintroduce a real world historical/cultural figure through reinterpreting their story to fit a contemporary political message or outlook. While these movies claim to represent a historical narrative as fact (especially *Oppenheimer* as a biopic), their nature as objects of entertainment require that creative liberties are taken to make them more engaging to actually watch. Both of these movies, through their format as *high cinema*, get away with distorting their subject matter; the nature of entertainment allows them to at once acknowledge their falsity while also hiding behind the concrete authority of historical fact—to use the *aura* of its subject's history to advance a contemporary narrative or viewpoint. In doing so, they, as pieces of media, raise these characters up into the realm of modern myth. *Oppenheimer* as a movie becomes the origin story of our modern political conundrum, made all the more literal by Nolan's clear allusions and overtones towards myth [in comparing J. Robert Oppenheimer himself to Prometheus and structuring his narrative as a hero's journey]: the *Barbie* movie is the confirmation of her legacy (as a so-called "feminist icon"), and in turn the legacy of consumer capitalism—*Barbie* [con-

sumerism] has always been with us, will always be with us, has always stood by us, and will continue to look out for our best interests. This isn't even to mention *Barbie*'s viral marketing campaign, suited perfectly for the vapid and identity-hungry masses of the modern era.

These movies' status as media and objects in the world instead remove their subjects from reality and place them into the *unreality* of entertainment—into the pantheon of *modern myth*. It is a shrinking number of corporate conglomerates that increasingly devour ownership of more and more of our cultural and historical legacy and mythology. While—unlike under a classical fascist regime—the ownership and control over this culture and history is privatized, these corporations benefit greatly from maintaining a *total culture* beholden to the abstracted Neoliberal Market State; by constraining these cultural narratives, corporate interests justify the continued veracity of neoliberal capitalism as the *only* system, doing so through *our* cultural legacy.

Both of these movies highlight a trend within media of the modern era; The speed of digital communication and the ease that technology brought to quickly disseminating information lead to an increased awareness of "social injustice" and an interest in expressing that back through our media. Media is no longer just a consumable object, but a means for expressing greater awareness; in turn our veneration and personal connection to these pieces of media supposedly reflect onto us our own moral righteousness and sense of identity. Media has taken on the role of moral arbiter, as if public criticism of aspects of capitalism automatically remove that object from perpetuating that very system which it supposedly despises. *Oppenheimer* casting an

overzealous United States government as the villain of its narrative does not absolve us—the consumer-spectator—of the guilt, and more importantly the responsibility, that that history represents.

Whether they are “good movies” or successful critiques as works of art are not just subjective but irrelevant; it does not matter what any piece of media believes or what politics it expresses—all that matters is that it exists as a symbol in the world, in which meaning can be placed, and ultimately consumed. Metamodernism has ushered in the commodification of *belief* itself—that which makes us inherently *human*.



13 Dumbest Mistakes That Changed :
the World Forever

61K views • 1 day ago

We have been conditioned to believe that mass media is a conduit for an individual's sense of identity and purpose, as if replacing *thought* and *opinion*. As users online we are granted our own experiences—our own connections to media which we hold close to holy. Those are the things that make up our identity as cultural beings in the digital world. For those of us who have come of age in the metamodern era, we have been inundated by mass media our entire lives; our lives have become pure aesthetic, and we have welcomed it.

Nearly four generations have been raised with some version of a functional cyberspace. Its lack of physicality allows it to change aesthetically

while also staying functionally the same, *forever*. Watchmojo has been posting videos every day for nearly twenty years. Look at their perfectly uniform grid and see the way in which disparate information has been diminished and homogenized: top 10 failed McDonald's products, top 10 Holocaust films, top 10 movie milfs, top 10 anime opening theme songs, top 10 most evil kids in history, top 10 insanely racist moments in Disney history that you totally forgot about, top 10 Iron Man armors, top 10 sexiest accents, top 10 infamous mass shootings in the US... Those inadvertent cultural institutions such as Watchmojo have continued unchanging for inordinate amounts of time, as if manufacturing the facade of the infinite horizon which we ride towards but never reach. The internet has literally become neoliberal space—one in which the mere act of existing within it registers you as a consuming entity, imbuing your existence with a value that can be surveilled and extracted.

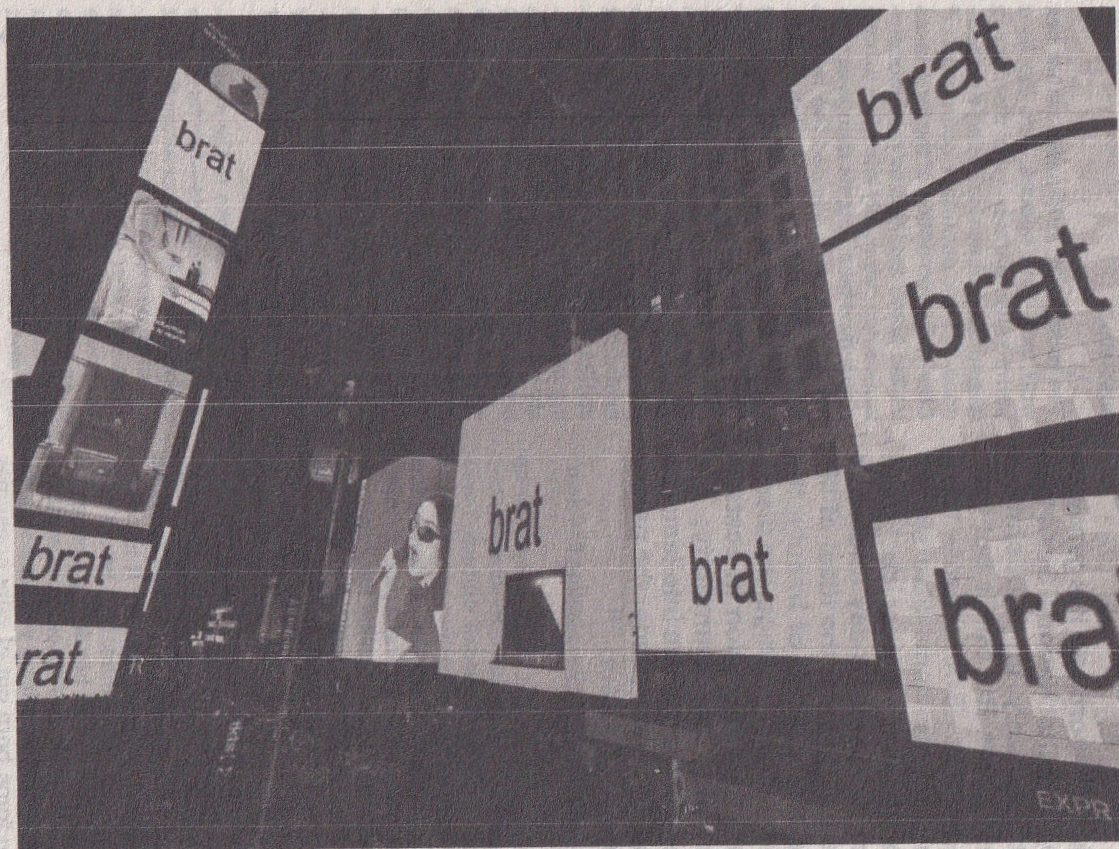
The influence of this exploitative pressure degrades the value of all cultural production. Information is compressed to its most basic parts; topics which could be covered in entire volumes and debated for time immemorial are condensed into seconds-long clips. Entire life stories are compressed into single features-length resolutions. Single words and phrases are infused with intense and ever-shifting symbolic meaning (and often no discernible meaning at all). Communication platforms have *recentralized*. Pop cultural legacy is shifted between an ever-consolidating cabal of corporate interests. As a consequence, pop culture seems to encourage a consolidation of its audience—broadening its scope to account for differing opinions but ultimately always synthesizing into a single, unbreakable monolith.



↑ TILT ↓

Election propaganda displayed on the headquarters of Mussolini's Italian Fascist Party in the Palazzo Braschi, Rome, 1934.

↑TILT↓



Charli xcX Time Square Takeover in New York City, November 18th, 2024.

metamodernism & the apocryphal

"More importantly, it is generally thought that National Socialism stands only for brutishness and terror. But this is not true. National Socialism—more broadly, fascism—also stands for an ideal or rather ideals that are persistent today under the other banners: the ideal of life as art, the cult of beauty, the fetishism of courage, the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community; the repudiation of the intellect; the family of man (under the parent hood of leaders)."²³

—Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism"

I intended to end this essay with an examination of a contemporary fascist aesthetic in American culture. I was initially going to trot out the tried and true markers which Susan Sontag has already noted as being a part of American pop culture far earlier than even the 1970s—hypermasculinity, aestheticized violence, what I want to call "libertarian futurism" and the endless culture war of Trumpism. But that is not very new or original, and is in fact unfitting with the themes of this essay.

So what instead might actually constitute a contemporary fascist aesthetic within American culture? It is not as far as you may think it to be... I refer of course to that blinding green which has caked every surface of our world—a hyper-individualizing yet depersonalizing force born out of pure consumer

lust and embraced by the masses to a degree almost never before seen in contemporary American mass media. I am here to say that *brat* is a fascist aesthetic.

The term "brat" originated within sex work and kink spaces, referring to a submissive partner who displays a pleasurable, almost taunting disobedience to their dominant counterpart.²⁴ Charli xcx's co-option of the term takes on the same qualities as metamodernism—while ostensibly intending to have a specified meaning, its deluge across mass media has allowed the term to become a meaningless catchall, one which can come to signify anything that it needs to; Olivia Petter of *The Independent* ordains: "Brat summer isn't just about cigs and cocaine—it's whatever you want it to be."²⁵ Brat is pure aesthetic, lacking any concrete meaning. In this way, brat is not just apolitical but *anti*-political—ever-shifting yet easily co-opted to fit any variety of political narratives. Brat is not a belief but a reflection, not a politic but an obfuscation; to be brat is to reflect whatever it is you desire to see. It is a hyper-individualizing force—much like neoliberal consumerism—bestowing upon its wearer a sense of true personal identity while also allowing that individual to be inducted into the cultural zeitgeist—fulfilling the desire for acceptance and kinship among other like-minded individuals.

And Charli speaks to the most special set of individuals—her fans, who support her and give her strength: "that doesn't mean we have to do any pandering to any other side of the industry, we just have to do it for them and we have to make them feel so special because they have championed me and us for so long and that's all we need to like light

23. Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," 96.

24. Cigi Ergle, "A Beginner's Guide to Being a 'brat' in BDSM," *Mashable*, April 20, 2023, <https://mashable.com/article/bdsm-hate-explained>.

25. Olivia Petter, "Brat Summer Isn't Just About Cigs and Cocaine – It's Whatever You Want It to Be," *The Independent*, July 18, 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/brat-gut-summer-charli-xcx-trend-what-42-582080.html>.

a fire.”²⁶ Mussolini may concur more forcefully: “Far from crushing the individual, the Fascist State multiplies his energies, just as in a regiment a soldier is not diminished but multiplied by the number of his fellow soldiers.”²⁷

“You should recognize that this fan base I have built is so hungry for me,”²⁸ Charli says. We see Charli and her international party girl lifestyle—a type of hedonism that is perhaps the only thing that brat truly stands for—and we *desire* it; we desire the wealth, the status, the spotlight, the party, the drugs, the *vibes*, but most importantly we desire the freedom from responsibility that one can achieve by never leaving the party. brat, as with all consumer culture, is pure escapism. The core purpose of this kind of culture is to keep us preoccupied, distracted—“No, I never go home, don’t sleep, don’t eat / Just do it on repeat.” There is no world outside of brat; the whole world is brat.

Aesthetically, brat borrows heavily from the depersonalizing and hypnotic visuality of goon and porn culture; as Max Naum describes: “the deliberate arrangement and saturation of visual stimuli not only captivate but also condition inner reflexes, establishing an authoritative presence over the gooner’s experiences.”²⁹ The brilliant simplicity of the *brat aesthetic* has allowed it to become an oversaturated and easily recognizable emblem throughout the world. Its key phrases—of which include song lyrics like “365 party girl bumpin’ that” and “I’m just living that life / Von Dutch”, marketing plays like “brat and it’s completely different but also still brat”, or viral aphorism such as “brat summer”—are repeated over and over again in incremental variations, casting out onto massive billboards and micro-

screens around the globe. The green is corrosive and unnatural; on a bright digital screen, its chroma reflects onto the surrounding surface, its lambent green glow spilling into the world of the real. Countless have tried their hand at a variation of brat’s central graphic, molded to fit whatever situation it is called to represent. Its virality creates a green fog of war, clogging every surface, every screen, every person who posts themselves wearing their brat merch. brat is inescapable and totalizing; one can find variations of the black helvetica on bright green almost anywhere, from brat kinetic slime to brat job applications, brat Oreo’s to brat systems of government.

The lyrical content encourages both narcissism and self-loathing, vacillating wildly but always reflecting on Charli’s life. Despite its ironic sheen, Charli is often earnest with her views—whether that be over insecurity (*Rewind*) or situationships (*Talk Talk*); she by her own admission intends to speak to a very specific set of circumstances and individuals (her “niche”). But *brat*’s widespread adoption by the cultural zeitgeist leads to a certain amount of universalization of those same topics which were once so personal only to Charli. “I feel like, a little bit arrogant for saying this, but out of this time where the niche is so rewarded, after like serving this niche... kind of a monoculture moment happened.”³⁰ The music of *brat*, a revitalization of EDM “club classics”, encourages one to lose themselves within the music and become one with the undulations of the crowd—a sea of individualized fans championing the preeminence of brat summer. Everything revolves around Charli, making us all brat; “When you’re in the mirror, do you like what you see? / When you’re in the mirror, you’re just looking at me, / I’m everywhere, I’m so Julia.”

26. Zane Lowe and Charli xcx, “Charli Xcx: The BRAT Interview | Apple Music,” YouTube, October 8, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgBMFg7Zglw&t=793s>.

27. Mussolini, “The Doctrine of Fascism,” 8.

28. Zane Lowe and Charli xcx, “Charli Xcx: The BRAT Interview,”

29. Max Naum, “Stimulative Assessment,” *Ethics* 01, (May 30, 2024), 19.

30. Zane Lowe and Charli xcx, “Charli Xcx: The BRAT Interview,”

THERE IS NO EXPLANATION FOR WHAT I DO. THE ANSWER IS ALWAYS 'NO COMMENT'. WE MUST CULTIVATE DESIRE, CHAOS AND DESTRUCTION. THE WHOLE ALBUM CAMPAIGN IS HIGH ART. BUT IT IS ALSO CRUCIAL TO UNDERSTAND THE BENEFIT OF LOW ART AND CELEBRITY. THE COUPLING OF THE TWO IS VITAL.

YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND MY VISION. THIS IS GLOBAL. I WILL PROVIDE MOMENTUM AND TELL THE STORY IN A LASER FOCUSED WAY. WE MUST EXECUTE EVERYTHING WITH POWER AND CONFIDENCE.

THE ANGELS ARE READY AND WAITING. THIS IS THE MOMENT.

Excerpt from *the brat manifesto*, written by Charli xcx.

I am not calling Charli xcx a Fascist. I am not saying that to enjoy brat makes you Fascist. I am saying that brat is a universe with Charli at the center.

This is what we should come to expect: Exponentially larger and larger advertising campaigns which overtake a consumer's entire life; ones which will prey with increasing intensity on a desire for identity, demanding that you reshape yourself into a reflection of that aesthetic by telling you the aesthetic is not just for you, but *is you*; pure aesthetic, pure escapism, pure excess. It will sell a sense of belonging while stripping away any true political power, any true belief or action. As Klaus Theweleit says: "The Utopia of fascism is an edenic freedom from responsibility."³¹ The aesthetic will be everywhere—every sense will be inundated with stimuli which reinforces the central message; as Zenzélé Soa-Clarke describes *Barbie*: "The prevalence and scheduled saturation of these images establishes their consumption as ritual. The form is thus the negotiation of an identity, and all the images which comprise it add a sense of validity; they offer shortcuts to build our own identities through association with the cumulative image."³²

31. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, 432.

Metamodern consumer tactics will increasingly mirror those of nation-building, creating a sort of ideological nationalism free from any geographic tether. Anthony D. Smith summarizes the vital aspects of nationalism outlined by Ernest Gellner: "Together, these nationalist concepts of regeneration and the golden age, mission and destiny, authenticity and folk culture, all presuppose the influence of shared memories of a collective past, however distorted or dimly remembered," which, when harnessed, can "mobilise and unite its members" under a centralized collective memory. With that academic definition of nationalism fresh in your mind, consider this quote from the trade article "Brat Summer Captures Authenticity in an AI-Powered World": "Brands and organizations must not lose sight of authenticity if they want to build consumer trust and foster communications that build long-term customer loyalty with messaging, content creation and social media posts that resonate."³³

32. Zenzélé Soa-Clarke, "The Brand That Feeds You," *Medium*, July 19, 2023, <https://medium.com/@czenemvnlthe-brand-that-feeds-you-66e9f0cbbd4d>.

33. Anthony D. Smith, "Memory and Modernity: Reflections on Ernest Gellner's Theory of Nationalism," *Nations and Nationalism* 2 (3) (November 1996): 371–88, 385.

34. Caroline Kamesschen, "Brat Summer Captures Authenticity in an AI-Powered World," *Boopar PR + Marketing*, August 27, 2024, <https://boopar.com/brat-summer-captures-authenticity-in-an-ai-powered-world/>.

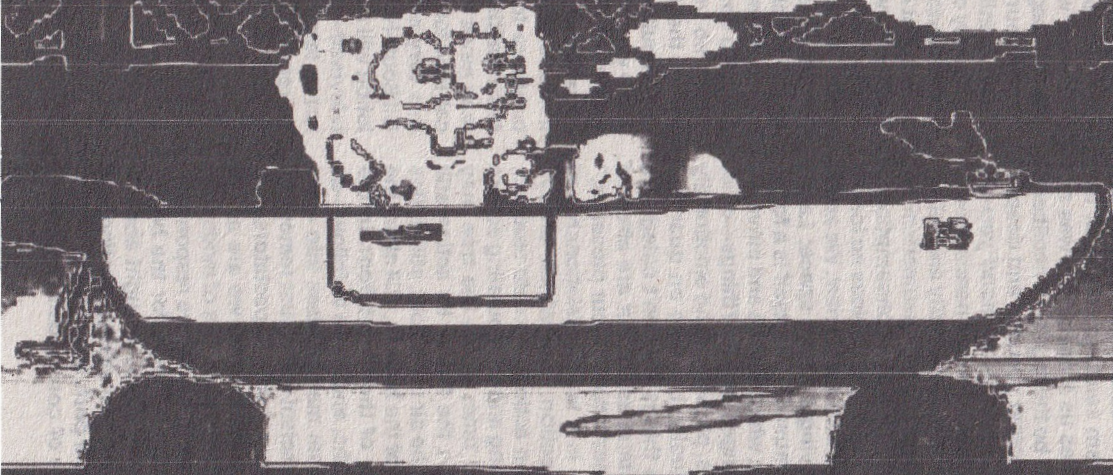
the end of metamodernism

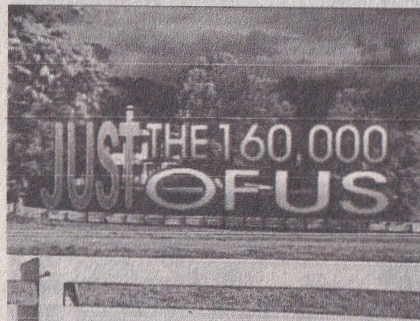
The future that neoliberalism has prescribed for us is bleak and seemingly without alternative. Neoliberalism seeks to rob us of our imagination, our sense of creativity and spontaneity; neoliberalism seeks to rob us of that which makes us *human*. This was and will always be the legacy of neoliberalism, its greatest success and deepest foil. But I ask you—*demand you*—to reject nihilism, to reject narcissism, to reject the culture of vapidty and self-interest that neoliberal consumerism has forced upon us. Our consumption is no longer trivial, our choices no longer harmless or inconsequential. We are all forces moving through space; Leslie Olivo has mused, "Life itself is a force, like gravity, which pulses and moves. It enacts changes on lots of things—other people, yes, physically and emotionally and spiritually, but also on quantum states, on things we don't categorize or understand as life but are affected by our observation, by our presence." Existence is a mutual relationship of interconnection, one which always builds upon action to create reaction, reverberating and manipulating across space and time. While the tree may fall alone in the forest, its action still displaces the air underfoot, still ruffles the leaves of the bushes, still alters the geography of the forest floor. In the days, months, and years to follow—as neoliberalism metastasizes into overt forms of fascism—we must remember that we are not mere spectators of a world coming undone; we are active participants in the horrors of modernity, and we alone shoulder the responsibility of changing things for the better. Metamodernism has brought about a culture of performativity, creating and sustaining a perfumed reality free of the burden of consequence. Conflict

is contained to the interim between the curtain's rise and fall, within the prescribed bounds that it has been allowed to occupy. Jean-Paul Sartre so admonished this as the bourgeois theater of representation; metamodernism has universalized what he describes as a petrifying pessimism, moving past the bounds of the stage and secreting into all human interaction. We may find ourselves within one big *production*, one with beginning and middle already plotted, hurtling towards the orchestrated, annihilating end. But we must vigorously denounce this—for instead of this theater of disaffection, we must bring about Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, for which we are both spectator and performer, shocked forcefully into action by the unrelenting pressure of mortality! For Sartre, the theater is the ring in which our rights are fought for, in which we fight for agency, for the ability to *enact*.

It is so very easy to lose yourself within the totalizing forces of consumer culture. But I implore you: don't allow yourself to be swallowed by that behemoth, don't allow the passivity of metamodernism to destroy your real, intrinsic sense of self. As long as we continue to devote ourselves to the false realities of neoliberalism, then we may never be free from subjugation. I call now for action! I call on you reading this very essay, to take action! For as Gil Scott-Heron proclaimed: "the revolution will not be televised—will not be televised—will not be televised—will not be televised—the revolution will be *live*." ☺

godfucking
damnit





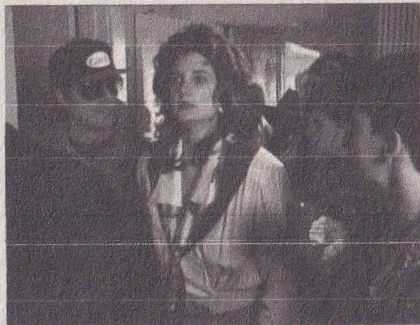
**Fridays at 10:00, Cecil B. DeMille Jr.'s
epic sitcom *Just the 160,000 of Us*.**



Watch the sorrow, joys, and wacky situations that happen when 160,000 people live in one house.



Next week on a very special
Just the 160,000 of Us...



"Bob—



Susan, Latifah, Rhonda, Cindy, Mandy, Bambi, Babs, Coach Farnsworth, Dr. Gaines, Nurse Reynolds,



Sly, Ice Pick, Equay Equay, Colonel, Aunt Mae,



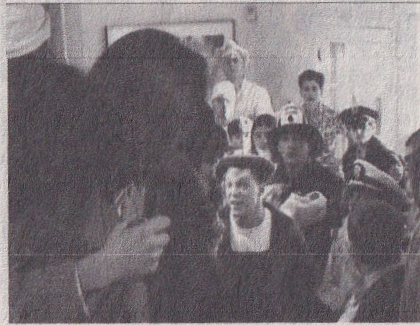
I found *these...*



In Deedee, Karen, Wendy, Lobo, Ashley, Tanner, Half Pint, and Fatty's room."



"Well, I was talking to Chuck, Ricky, Flabby Peterson, Gilbert, Tom-Tom, and Dr. Juarez..."



"Bob, Susan, Latifah, Rhonda, Jimmy, Reverend Friar, EVERYBODY..."



Sam, Josh, Señor Dolchez, Meg, Vlad, Stu, Eric, Ranger Dave, Ratass Sal,



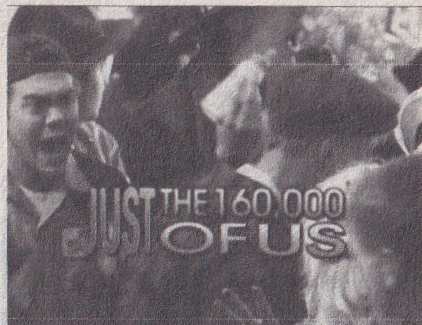
Dean, Bull, most of the Bowsers, all of the Tims, and what's-his-name...



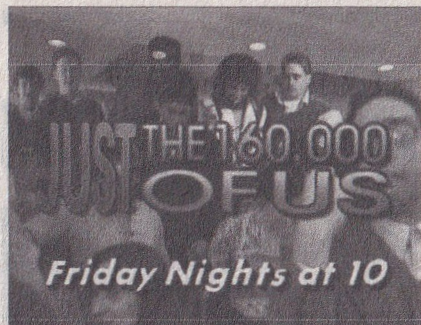
The guy with the sideburns...



Fell down the old abandoned mine shaft!"



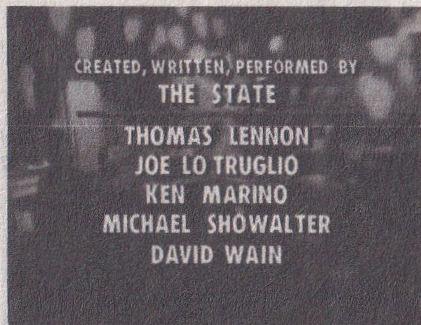
Just the 160,000 of Us,



JUST THE 160,000
OF US

Friday Nights at 10

Sweeping across America on Friday nights
this fall like locusts.



CREATED, WRITTEN, PERFORMED BY
THE STATE

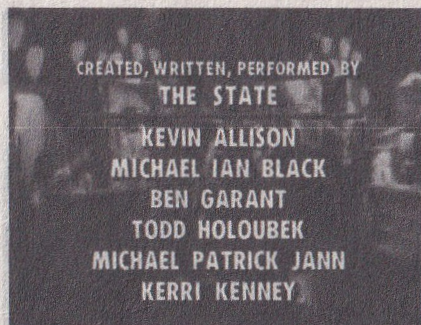
THOMAS LENNON
JOE LO TRUGLIO
KEN MARINO
MICHAEL SHOWALTER
DAVID WAIN

Na-Na-Na-Na-Na



The
State

Na-Na-Na-Na-Na



CREATED, WRITTEN, PERFORMED BY
THE STATE

KEVIN ALLISON
MICHAEL IAN BLACK
BEN GARANT
TODD HOLOUBEK
MICHAEL PATRICK JANN
KERRI KENNEY

Na-Na-Na-Na-Na

- Short Description Of
- A New Technique Of
- Acting Which Produces
- An Alienation Effect
- Bertolt Brecht

What follows represents an attempt to describe a technique of acting which was applied in certain theatres with a view to taking the incidents portrayed and alienating them from the spectator. The aim of this technique, known as the alienation effect, was to make the spectator adapt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach to the incident. The means were artistic.

The first condition for the A-effect's application to this end is that stage and

auditorium must be purged of everything 'magical' and that no 'hypnotic tensions' should be set up. This ruled out any attempt to make the stage convey the flavour of a particular place (a room at evening, a road in the autumn), or to create atmosphere by relaxing the tempo of the conversation. The audience was not 'worked up' by a display of temperament or 'swept away' by acting with tautened muscles; in short, no attempt was made to put it in a trance and give it the illusion of watching an ordinary unrehearsed event. As will be seen presently, the audience's tendency to plunge into such illusions has to be checked by specific artistic means. *



E.g. such mechanical means as very brilliant illumination of the stage (since a half-lit stage plus a completely darkened auditorium makes the spectator less level-headed by preventing him from observing his neighbor and in turn hiding him from his neighbor's eyes) and also making visible the sources of light.

MAKING VISIBLE THE SOURCES OF LIGHT

Here is a point in showing the lighting apparatus openly, as it is one of the means of preventing an unwanted element of illusion; it scarcely disturbs the necessary concentration. If we light the actors and their performance in such a way that the lights themselves are within the spectator's field of vision we destroy part of his illusion of being present at a spontaneous, transitory, authentic, unrehearsed event. He sees that arrangements have been made to show something; something is being repeated here under

special conditions, for instance in a very brilliant light. Displaying the actual lights is meant to be a counter to the old fashioned theatre's efforts to hide them. No one would expect the lighting to be hidden at a sporting event, a boxing match for instance. Whatever the points of difference between the modern theatre's presentations and those of a sporting promoter, they do not include the same concealment of the sources of light as the old theatre found necessary.

The first condition for the achievement of the A-effect is that the actor must invest what he has to show with a definite gest of showing. It is of course necessary to drop the assumption that there is a fourth wall cutting the audience off from the stage and the consequent illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality and without an audience. That being so, it is possible for the actor in principle to address the audience direct.

It is well known that contact between audience and stage is normally made on the basis of empathy. Conventional actors devote their efforts so exclusively to bringing about this psychological operation that

they may be said to see it as the principal aim of their art. ☼ Our introductory remarks will already have made it clear that the technique which produces an A-effect is the exact opposite of that which aims at empathy' The actor applying it is bound not to try to bring about the empathy operation.

Yet in his efforts to reproduce particular characters and show their behavior he need not renounce the means of empathy entirely. He uses these means just as any normal person with no particular acting talent would use them if he wanted to portray someone else, i.e. show how he behaves. This showing of other people's behavior happens



Compare these remarks by Pool Reumert, the best-known Danish actor: "...If I feel I am dying, and if I really feel it, then so does everybody else; if I act as though I had a dagger in my hand, and am entirely filled by the one idea of killing the child, then everybody shudders...The whole business is a matter of mental activity being communicated by emotions, or the other way round if you prefer it: a feeling so strong as to be an obsession, which is translated into thoughts. If it comes off it is the

most infectious thing in the world; anything external is then a matter of complete indifference..."

And Rapaport, 'The Work of the Actor', *Theater Workshop*, October 1936: "...On the stage the actor is surrounded entirely by fiction...The actor must be able to regard all this as though it were true, as though he were convinced that all that surrounds him on the stage is a living reality and, along with himself, he must convince the audience as well. This is the central feature of our method of work on the part...Take any object, a cap for

example; lay it on the table or on the floor and try to regard it as though it were a rat; make believe that it is a rat, and not a cap...Picture what sort of a rat it is; what size, colour?...We thus commit ourselves to believe quite naively that the object before us is something other than it is and, at the same time, learn to compel the audience to believe..."

This might be thought to be a course of instruction for conjurers, but in fact it is a course of acting, supposedly according to Stanislavsky's

time and again in ordinary life (witnesses of an accident demonstrating to newcomers how the victim behaved, a facetious person imitating a friend's walk, etc), without those involved making the least effort to subject their spectators to an illusion. At the same time they do feel their way into their characters' skins with a view to acquiring their characteristics.

As has already been said, the actor too will make use of this psychological operation. But whereas the usual practice in acting is to execute it during the actual performance, in the hope of stimulating the spectator into a similar operation, he will achieve it only at an

earlier stage, at some time during rehearsals.

To safeguard against an unduly 'impulsive', frictionless and uncritical creation of characters and incidents, more reading rehearsals can be held than usual. The actor should refrain from living himself into the part prematurely in any way, and should go on functioning as long as possible as a reader (which does not mean a reader-aloud). An important step is memorizing one's first impressions.

When reading his part the actor's attitude should be one of a man who is astounded and contradicts. Not only the occurrence of the incidents, as he reads about them,

method. One wonders if a technique that equips an actor to make the audience see rats where there aren't any can really be all that suitable for disseminating the truth. Given enough alcohol it doesn't take acting to persuade almost anybody that he is seeing rats: pink ones.

◆
QUOTATION

Standing in a free and direct relationship to it, the actor allows his character to speak and move;

he presents a report. He does not have to make us forget that the text isn't spontaneous, but has been memorized, is a fixed quantity; the fact doesn't matter, as we anyway assume that the report is not about himself but about others. His attitude would be the same if he were simply speaking from his own memory. [...]

◆
The epic actor has to accumulate far more material than has been the case till now. What he has

to represent is no longer himself as king, himself as scholar, himself as gravedigger, etc., but just kings, scholars, gravediggers, which means that he has to look around him in the world of reality. Again, he has to learn how to imitate; something that is discouraged in modern acting on the ground that it destroys his individuality.

●
The theatre can create the corresponding A-effect in the performance in a number of ways.

but the conduct of the man he is playing, as he experiences it, must be weighed up by him and their peculiarities understood; none can be taken as given, as something that 'was bound to turn out that way', that was 'only to be expected from a character like that'. Before memorizing the words he must memorize what he felt astounded at and where he felt impelled to contradict. For these are dynamic forces that he must preserve in creating his performance.

When he appears on the stage, besides what he actually is doing he will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what he is not doing; that is to say he will act in

such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that his acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one out of the possible variants. He will say for instance "You'll pay for that", and not say "I forgive you" He detests his children; it is not the case that he loves them. He moves down stage left and not up stage right. Whatever he doesn't do must be contained and conserved in what he does. In this way every sentence and every gesture signifies a decision; the character remains under observation and is tested. The technical term for this procedure is "fixing the 'not...but'".

The Munich production of *Edward II* for the first time had titles preceding the scenes, announcing the contents. The Berlin production of *The Three-penny Opera* had the titles of the songs projected while they were sung. The Berlin production of *Mann ist Mann* had the actors' figures projected on big screens during the action.



Another thing that makes for freedom in the actor's relationship with his audience is that he

does not treat it as an undifferentiated mass. He doesn't boil it down to a shapeless dumping in the stockpot of the emotions. He does not address himself to everybody alike; he allows the existing divisions within the audience to continue, in fact he widens them. He has friends and enemies in the audience; he is friendly to the one group and hostile to the other. He takes sides, not necessarily with his character but if not with it then against it. (At least, that is his basic attitude, though it too must be variable and

change according to what the character may say at different stages. There may, however, also be points at which everything is in the balance and the actor must withhold judgment, though this again must be expressly shown in his acting.)



If King Lear (in Act I, scene i) tears up a map when he divides his kingdom between his daughters, then the act of division is alienated. Not only does it draw our attention to his kingdom, but

The actor does not allow himself to become completely transformed on the stage into the character he is portraying. He is not Lear, Harpagon, Schweik; he shows them. He reproduces their remarks as authentically as he can; he puts forward their way of behaving to the best of his abilities and knowledge of men; but he never tries to persuade himself (and thereby others) that this amounts to a complete transformation. Actors will know what it means if I say that a typical kind of acting without this complete transformation takes place when a producer or colleague shows one how to play a particular passage. It is not his own part, so he is

not completely transformed; he underlines the technical aspect and retains the attitude of someone just making suggestions.

Once the idea of total transformation is abandoned the actor speaks his part not as if he were improvising it himself but like a quotation. ♦ At the same time he obviously has to render all the quotation's overtones, the remark's full human and concrete shape; similarly the gesture he makes must have the full substance of a human gesture even though it now represents a copy.

Given this absence of total transformation in the acting there are three aids which may help to alienate the actions and remarks

by treating the kingdom so plainly as his own private property he throws some light on the basis of the feudal idea of the family. In *Julius Caesar* the tyrant's murder by Brutus is alienated if during one of his monologues accusing Caesar of tyrannical motives he himself maltreats a slave waiting on him. Weigel as Maria Stuart suddenly took the crucifix hanging round her neck and used it coquettishly as a fan, to give herself air. (See too Brecht: 'Übungsstücke für Schauspieler' in *Versuche II*, p. 107.)

NOTE: The 'practice scenes for actors' referred to at the end of Note 14 are new scenes to go with *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet* etc., showing the characters in a slightly different light; they are published in *Versuche II*. One was performed in the George Tabori / Lotte Lenya programme *Brecht on Brecht*. There is an unpublished note by Brecht (Archive 154/56) outlining what again seems to be the programme to an actors' course, where these are included:

Repertoire of the School:

1. Bible scene
2. Shakespeare studies
 - (a) *Hamlet*
 - (b) *Romeo & Juliet*
3. Opening and first scene of *Aus Nichts Wird Nichts*
4. A dog went into the kitchen
5. *Die Mutter*, scene 5

of the characters being portrayed:

1. *Transposition into the third person.*

2. *Transposition into the past.*

3. *Speaking the stage directions out loud.*

Using the third person and the past tense allows the actor to adopt the right attitude of detachment. In addition he will look for stage directions and remarks that comment on his lines, and speak them aloud at rehearsal ('He stood up and exclaimed angrily, not having eaten...'; or 'He had never been told so before, and didn't know if it was true or not', or 'He smiled, and said with forced nonchalance: ...'). Speaking the stage directions out loud in the third person results in a

clash between two tones of voice, alienating the second of them, the text proper. This style of acting is further alienated by taking place on the stage after having already been outlined and announced in words. Transposing it into the past gives the speaker a standpoint from which he can look back at his sentence. The sentence too is thereby alienated without the speaker adopting an unreal point of view; unlike the spectator, he has read the play right through and is better placed to judge the sentence in accordance with the ending, with its consequences, than the former, who knows less and is more of a stranger to the sentence.

THE A-EFFECT AS

A PROCEDURE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The achievement of the A-effect constitutes something utterly ordinary, recurrent; it is just a widely-practiced way of drawing one's own or someone else's attention to a thing, and it can be seen in education as also in business conferences of one sort or another. The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn,

from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and un-expected. What is obvious is in a certain sense made incomprehensible, but this is only in order that it may then be made all the easier to comprehend. Before familiarity can turn into awareness the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness; we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation. However frequently recurrent, modest, vulgar it may be it will now be labelled as something unusual.

A common use of the A-effect is when someone says: 'Have you ever really looked carefully at your watch?' The questioner knows that I've looked at it often enough, and now his question deprives me of the sight which I've grown used to and which accordingly has nothing more to say to me. I used to look at it to see the time, and now when he asks me in this importunate way I realize that I have given up seeing the watch itself with an astonished eye; and it is in many ways an astonishing piece of machinery.

This composite process leads to an alienation of the text in the rehearsals which generally persists in the performance too. ☯ The directness of the relationship with the audience allows and indeed forces the actual speech delivery to be varied in accordance with the greater or smaller significance attaching to the sentences. Take the case of witnesses addressing a court. The underlinings, the characters' insistence on their remarks, must be developed as a piece of effective virtuosity. If the actor turns to the audience it must be a whole-hearted turn rather than the asides and soliloquizing; technique of the old-fashioned theatre.

Similarly it is an alienation effect of the simplest sort if a business discussion starts off with the sentence: 'Have you ever thought what happens to the waste from your factory which is pumped into the river twenty-four hours a day?' This waste wasn't just swept down the river unobserved; it was carefully channelled into the river; men and machines have worked on it; the river has changed colour, the waste has flowed away most conspicuously, but just as waste. It was superfluous to the process of manufacture,

and now it is to become material for manufacture; our eye turns to it with interest. The asking of the question has alienated it, and intentionally so. The very simplest sentences that apply in the A-effect are those with 'Not...But': (He didn't say 'come in' but 'keep moving'. 'He was not pleased but amazed'). They include an expectation which is justified by experience but, in the event, disappointed. One might have thought that...but one oughtn't to have thought it. There was not just one possibility but two; both are introduced,

To get the full A-effect from the poetic medium the actor should start at rehearsal by paraphrasing the verse's content in vulgar prose, possibly accompanying this by the gestures designed for the verse. A daring and beautiful handling of verbal media will alienate the text. (Prose can be alienated by translation into the actor's native dialect.)

Gesture will be dealt with below, but it can at once be said that every-thing to do with the emotions has to be externalized; that is to say, it must be developed into a gesture. The actor has to find a sensibly perceptible outward expression for his character's emotions, preferably some action that

then the second one is alienated, then the first as well. To see one's mother as a man's wife one needs an A-effect; this is provided, for instance, when one acquires a stepfather. If one sees one's teacher hounded by the bailiffs an A-effect occurs: one is jerked out of a relationship in which the teacher seems big into one where he seems small. An alienation of the motor-car takes place if after driving a modern car for a long while we drive an old model T Ford. Suddenly we hear explosions once more; the motor works on the

gives away what is going on inside him. The emotion in question must be brought out, must lose all its restrictions so that it can be treated on a big scale. Special elegance, power and grace of gesture bring about the A-effect.

A masterly use of gesture can be seen in Chinese acting. The Chinese actor achieves the A-effect by being seen to observe his own movements.

Whatever the actor offers in the way of gesture, verse structure, etc., must be finished and bear the hallmarks of something rehearsed and rounded-off. The impression to be given is one of ease, which is at the same

time one of difficulties overcome. The actor must make it possible for the audience to take his own art, his mastery of technique, lightly too. He puts an incident before the spectator with perfection and as he thinks it really happened or might have happened. He does not conceal the fact that he has rehearsed it, any more than an acrobat conceals his training, and he emphasizes that it is his own (actor's) account, view, version of the incident.

Because he doesn't identify himself with him he can pick a definite attitude to adopt towards the character whom he portrays, can show what he thinks of him and invite

principle of explosions. We start feeling amazed that such a vehicle, indeed any vehicle not drawn by animal-power, can move; in short, we understand cars, by looking at them as something strange, new, as a triumph of engineering and to that extent something unnatural. Nature, which embraces the motor-car, is suddenly imbued with an element of unnaturalness, and from now on this is an indelible part of the concept of nature.

The expression 'in fact' can likewise certify or alienate. (He wasn't in fact at home; he said

he would be, but we didn't believe him and had a look; or again, we didn't think it possible for him not to be at home, but it was a fact.) The term 'actually' is just as conducive to alienation. ('I don't actually agree'.) Similarly the Eskimo definition 'A car is a wingless aircraft that crawls along the ground' is a way of alienating the car.

In a sense the alienation effect itself has been alienated by the above explanation; we have taken a common, recurrent, universally-practiced operation and tried to draw attention to it by

illuminating its peculiarity. But we have achieved the effect only with those people who have truly ('in fact;') grasped that it does 'not' result from every representation 'but' from certain ones: only 'actually' is it familiar.



ABOUT RATIONAL AND EMOTIONAL POINTS OF VIEW

The rejection of empathy is not the result of a rejection of the emotions, nor does it lead to

the spectator, who is likewise not asked to identify himself, to criticize the character portrayed.

The attitude which he adopts is a socially critical one. In his exposition of the incidents and in his characterization of the person he tries to bring out those features which come within society's sphere. In this way his performance becomes a discussion (about social conditions) with the audience he is addressing. He prompts the spectator to justify or abolish these conditions according to what class he belongs to. ©

The object of the A-effect is to alienate the social gest underlying every incident. By

social gest is meant the mimetic and gestural expression of the social relationships prevailing between people of a given period. ♦

It helps to formulate the incident for society, and to put it across in such a way that society is given the key, if titles are thought up for the scenes. These titles must have a historical quality.

This brings us to a crucial technical device: *historicization*.

The actor must play the incidents as historical ones. Historical incidents are unique, transitory incidents associated with particular periods. The conduct of the persons involved in them is not fixed and 'universally

such. The crude aesthetic thesis that emotions can only be stimulated by means of empathy is wrong. Nonetheless a non-aristotelean dramaturgy has to apply a cautious criticism to the emotions which it aims at and incorporates. Certain artistic tendencies like the provocative behavior of Futurists and Dadaists and the icing-up of music point to a crisis of the emotions. Already in the closing years of the Weimar Republic the post-war German drama took a decisively rationalistic turn. Fascism's grotesque

emphasizing of the emotions, together perhaps with the no less important threat to the rational element in Marxist aesthetics, led us to lay particular stress on the rational. Nevertheless there are many contemporary works of art where one can speak of a decline in emotional effectiveness due to their isolation from reason, or its revival thanks to a stronger rationalist message. This will surprise no one who has not got a completely conventional idea of the emotions.

The emotions always have a quite definite

class basis; the form they take at any time is historical, restricted and limited in specific ways. The emotions are in no sense universally human and timeless.

The linking of particular emotions with particular interests is not unduly difficult so long as one simply looks for the interests corresponding to the emotional effects of works of art. Anyone can see colonial adventures of the Second Empire looming behind Delacroix's paintings and Rimbaud's 'Bateau Ivre'.

human'; it includes elements that have been or may be overtaken by the course of history, and is subject to criticism from the immediately following period's point of view. The conduct of those born before is alienated from us by an incessant evolution.

It is up to the actor to treat present-day events and modes of behavior with the same detachment as the historian adopts with regard to those of the past. He must alienate these characters and incidents from us.

Characters and incidents from ordinary life, from our immediate surroundings, being familiar, strike us as more or less natural. Alienating them helps to make them

seem remarkable to us. Science has carefully developed a technique of getting irritated with the everyday, 'self-evident', universally accepted occurrence, and there is no reason why this infinitely useful attitude should not be taken over by art. ■ It is an attitude which arose in science as a result of the growth in human productive powers. In art the same motive applies.

As for the emotions, the experimental use of the A-effect in the epic theatre's German productions indicated that this way of acting too can simulate them, though possibly a different class of emotion is involved from those of the orthodox theatre. □ A critical

If one compares the 'Bateau Ivre' say, with Kipling's 'Ballad of East and West', one can see the difference between French mid-nineteenth century colonialism and British colonialism at the beginning of the twentieth. It is less easy to explain the effect that such poems have on ourselves, as Marx already noticed. Apparently emotions accompanying social progress will long survive in the human mind as emotions linked with interests, and in the case of works of art will do so more strongly than might have been

expected, given that in the meantime contrary interests will have made themselves felt. Every step forward means the end of the previous step forward, because that is where it starts and goes on from. At the same time it makes use of this previous step, which in a sense survives in men's consciousness as a step forward, just as it survives in its effects in real life. This involves a most interesting type of generalization, a continual process of abstraction. Whenever the works of art handed down to us allow us to share

the emotions of other men, of men of a bygone period, different social classes, etc., we have to conclude that we are partaking in interests which really were universally human. These men now dead represented the interests of classes that gave a lead to progress. It is a very different matter when Fascism today conjures up on the grandest scale emotions which for most of the people who succumb to them are not determined by interest.

attitude on the audience's part is a thoroughly artistic one. • Nor does the actual practice of the A-effect seem anything like so unnatural as its description. Of course it is a way of acting that has nothing to do with stylization as commonly practiced. The main advantage of the epic theatre with its A-effect, intended purely to show the world in such a way that it becomes manageable, is precisely its quality of being natural and earthly, its humour and its renunciation of all the mystical elements that have stuck to the orthodox theatre from the old days. •

IS THE CRITICAL ATTITUDE AN INARTISTIC ONE?

An old tradition leads people to treat a critical attitude as a predominantly negative one. Many see the difference between the scientific and artistic attitudes as lying precisely in their attitude to criticism. People cannot conceive of contradiction and detachment as being part of artistic appreciation. Of course such appreciation normally includes a higher level, which

appreciates critically, but the criticism here only applies to matters of technique; it is quite a different matter from being required to observe not a representation of the world but the world itself in a critical, contradictory, detached manner.

To introduce this critical attitude into art, the negative element which it doubtless includes must be shown from its positive side: this criticism of the world is active, practical, positive. Criticizing the course of a river means improving it, correcting it. Criticism of society is

ultimately revolution; there you have criticism taken to its logical conclusion and playing an active part. A critical attitude of this type is an operative factor of productivity; it is deeply enjoyable as such, and if we commonly use the term 'arts' for enterprises that improve people's lives why should art proper remain aloof from arts of this sort?



AYE...
The beat go off?

**Sir, this is the
scariest moment
of my life.**



She was a Sunday hen. She was still alive only because it was not yet 9:00 o'clock.

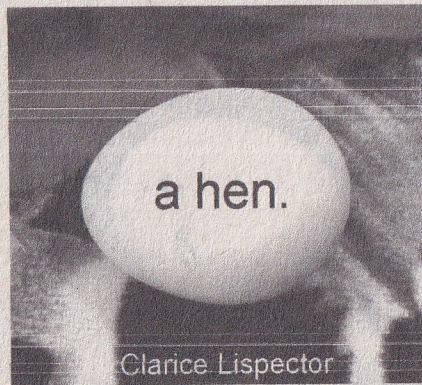
She seemed calm. Since Saturday she had cowered in a corner of the kitchen. She didn't look at anyone, no one looked at her. Even when they had selected her, fingering her intimately and indifferently, they couldn't have said whether she was fat or thin. No one would ever have guessed that she had a desire.

So it was a surprise when she opened her little wings, puffed out her breast, and, after two or three tries, reached the wall of the terrace. For an

instant she vacillated—long enough for the cook to scream—and then she was on the neighbor's terrace, and from there, by means of another awkward flight, she reached a tile roof. There

she remained like a misplaced weather vane, hesitating, first on one foot, then on the other. The family was urgently called and, in consternation, saw their lunch standing beside a chimney. The

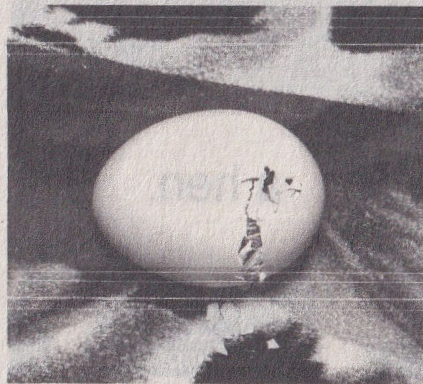
father of the family, reminding himself of the double obligation of eating and of occasionally taking exercise, happily got into his bathing trunks and resolved to follow the itinerary of the



hen. By cautious jumps he reached the roof, and the hen, trembling and hesitating, quickly picked another direction. The pursuit became more intense. From roof to roof, more than a block of the street was traversed. Unprepared for a more savage struggle for life, the hen had to decide for herself which routes to take, without any help from her race. In the young man, however, the sleeping hunter woke up. Lowly as was the prey, he gave a hunting cry.

Alone in the world, without father or mother, she ran, out of breath, concentrated, mute. Sometimes in her flight

she would stand at bay on the edge of a roof, gasping; while the young man leaped over others with difficulty, she had a moment in which to collect herself. Then she looked so free.



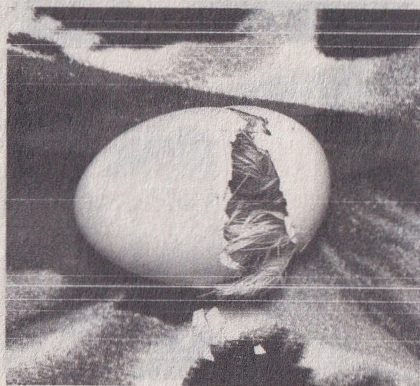
Stupid, timid, and free. Not victorious, the way a rooster in flight would have looked. What was there in her entrails that made a being of her? The hen is a being. It's true, she couldn't be counted on for anything. She herself couldn't count on herself—the way a rooster believes in his comb. Her only advantage was that there are so many hens that if one died another would appear

at the same moment, exactly like her, as if it were the same hen.

Finally, at one of the moments when she stopped to enjoy her escape, the young man caught her. Amid feathers and cries, she was taken prisoner. Then she was carried in triumph, by one wing, across the roofs and deposited on the kitchen floor with a certain violence. Still dazed, she shook herself a little, cackling hoarsely and uncertainly.

It was then that it happened. Completely overwhelmed, the hen laid an egg. Surprised, exhausted. Perhaps it was premature. But immediately

afterward, as if she had been born for maternity, she looked like an old, habitual mother. She sat down on the egg and remained that way, breathing, buttoning and unbutton-



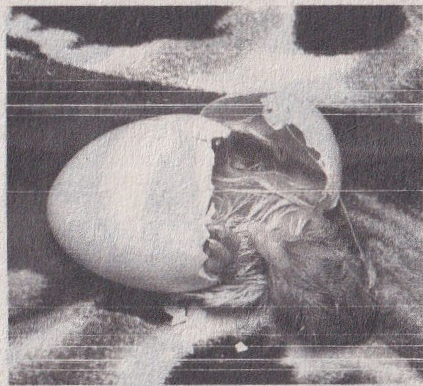
ing her eyes. Her heart, so small on a plate, made the feathers rise and fall, and filled that which would never be more than an egg with warmth. Only the little girl was near-by and witnessed everything,

terrified. As soon as she could tear herself away, she got up off the floor and shrieked: "Mama! Mama! Don't kill the hen any more! She laid an egg! She likes us!"

Everyone ran to the kitchen again and, silent, stood in a circle around the new mother. Warming her child, she was neither gentle nor harsh, neither happy nor sad; she was nothing; she was a hen. Which suggests no special sentiment. The father, the mother, and the daughter looked at her for some time, without any thought whatever to speak of. No one had ever patted the head of a hen. Finally,

with a certain brusqueness, the father decided: "If you have this hen killed, I'll never eat chicken again in my life!"

"Me too!" the little girl vowed ardently.



The mother shrugged, tired.

Unconscious of the life that had been granted her, the hen began to live with the family. The little girl, coming home from school, threw

down her school-bag and ran to the kitchen without stopping. Once in a while the father would still remember: "And to think I made her run in that state!" The hen became the queen of the house. Everyone

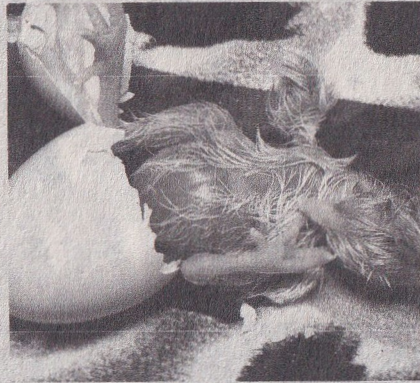
knew it except the hen. She lived between the kitchen and the kitchen terrace, making use of her two capacities: apathy and fear.

But when everyone in the house

was quiet and seemed to have forgotten her, she plucked up a little of the courage left over from her great escape and perambulated the tile floor, her body moving behind her head, deliberate as in a field, while the little head betrayed her: moving, rapid and vibrant, with the ancient and by now mechanical terror of her species.

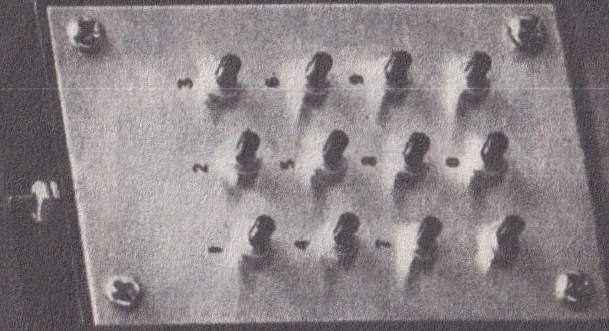
Occasionally, and always more rarely, the hen resembled the one that had once stood plain against the air on the edge of the roof, ready to make an announcement. At such moments she filled her lungs with the impure air of

the kitchen and, if females had been able to sing, she would not have sung, but she would have been much more contented. Though not even at these moments did the expression of her



empty head change. In flight, at rest, giving birth, or pecking corn—it was the head of a hen, the same that was designed at the beginning of the centuries.

Until one day they killed her and ate her and the years went by.



Actual size

Secrets of the Little Blue Box

by Ron Rosenbaum

A story so incredible it may even make you feel sorry for the phone company

THE BLUE BOX IS INTRODUCED: ITS QUALITIES ARE REMARKED

I am in the expensively furnished living room of Al Gilbertson*, the creator of the "blue box." Gilbertson is holding one of his shiny black-and-silver "blue boxes" comfortably in the palm of his hand, pointing out the thirteen little red push buttons sticking up from the console. He is dancing his fingers over the buttons, tapping out discordant beeping electronic jingles. He is trying to explain to me how his little blue box does nothing less than place the entire telephone system of the world, satellites, cables and all, at the service of the blue-box operator, free of charge.

"That's what it does. Essentially it gives you the power of a super operator. You seize a tandem with this top button," he presses the top button with his index finger and the blue box emits a high-pitched cheep, "and like that"—cheep goes the blue box again—"you control the phone company's long-distance switching systems from your cute little Princess phone or any old pay phone. And you've got anonymity. An operator has to operate from a definite location: the phone company knows where she is and what she's doing. But with your beeper box, once you hop onto a trunk, say from a Holiday Inn 800 [tollfree] number, they don't know where you are, or where you're coming from, they don't know how you slipped into their lines and popped up in that 800 number. They don't even know anything illegal is going on. And you can obscure your origins through as many levels as you like. You can call next door by way of White Plains, then over to Liverpool by cable, and then back here by satellite. You can call yourself from one pay phone all the way around the world to a pay phone next to you. And you get your dime back too."

"And they can't trace the calls? They can't charge you?"

"Not if you do it the right way. But you'll find that the free-call thing isn't really as exciting at first as the feeling of power you get from having one of these babies in your hand. I've watched people when they first get hold of one of these things and start using it, and discover they can make connections, set up crisscross and zigzag switching patterns back and forth across the world. They hardly talk to the people they finally reach. They say hello and start thinking of what kind of call to make next. They go a little crazy." He looks down at the neat little package in his palm. His fingers are still dancing, tapping out beeper patterns.

"I think it's something to do with how small my models are. There are lots of blue boxes around, but mine are the smallest and most sophisticated electronically. I wish I could show you the prototype we made for our big syndicate order."

He sighs. "We had this order for a thousand beeper boxes from a syndicate front man in Las Vegas. They use them to place bets coast to coast, keep lines open for hours, all of which can get expensive if you have to pay. The deal was a thousand blue boxes for \$300 apiece. Before then we retailed them for \$1,500 apiece, but \$300,000 in one lump was hard to turn down. We had a manufacturing deal worked out in the Philippines. Everything ready to go. Anyway, the model I had ready for limited mass production was small enough to fit inside a flip-top Marlboro box. It had flush-touch panels for a keyboard, rather than these unsightly buttons sticking out. Looked just like a tiny portable radio. In fact, I had designed it with a tiny transistor receiver to get one AM channel, so in case the law became suspicious the owner could switch on the radio part, start snapping his fingers, and no one could tell anything illegal was going on. I thought of everything for this model—I had it lined with a band of thermite which could be ignited by a band of thermite a tiny button transmitter on your belt, so it could be burned to ashes instantly in case

* His real name has been changed.

of a bust. It was beautiful. A beautiful little machine. You should have seen the faces on these syndicate guys when they came back after trying it out. They'd hold it in their palm like they never wanted to let it go, and they'd say, 'I can't believe it. I can't believe it.' You probably won't believe it until you try it."

THE BLUE BOX IS TESTED: CERTAIN CONNECTIONS ARE MADE

About eleven o'clock two nights later Fraser Lucey has a blue box in the palm of his left hand and a phone in the palm of his right. He is standing inside a phone booth next to an isolated shut-down motel off Highway 1. I am standing outside the phone booth.

Fraser likes to show off his blue box for people. Until a few weeks ago when Pacific Telephone made a few arrests in his city, Fraser Lucey liked to bring his blue box** to parties. It never failed: a few cheeps from his device and Fraser became the center of attention at the very hippest of gatherings, playing phone tricks and doing request numbers for hours. He began to take orders for his manufacturer in Mexico. He became a dealer.

Fraser is cautious now about where he shows off his blue box. But he never gets tired of playing with it. "It's like the first time every time," he tells me.

Fraser puts a dime in the slot. He listens for a tone and holds the receiver up to my ear. I hear the tone.

Fraser begins describing, with a certain practiced air, what he does while he does it.

"I'm dialing an 800 number now. Any 800 number will do. It's toll free. Tonight I think I'll use the --- [he names a well-known rent-a-car company] 800 number. Listen. It's ringing. Here, you hear it? Now watch."

He places the blue box over the mouthpiece of the phone so that the one silver and twelve black push buttons are facing up toward me. He presses the silver button—the one at the top—and I hear that high-pitched beep.

"That's 2600 cycles per second to be exact," says Lucey. "Now, quick, listen."

**** This particular blue box, like most blue boxes, is not blue. Blue boxes have come to be called "blue boxes" either 1) because the first blue box ever confiscated by phone-company security men happened to be blue, or 2) to distinguish them from "black boxes." Black boxes are devices, usually a resistor in series, which, when attached to home phones, allow all incoming calls to be made without charge to one's caller.**

He shoves the earpiece at me. The ringing has vanished. The line gives a slight hiccup, there is a sharp buzz, and then nothing but soft white noise.

"We're home free now," Lucey tells me, taking back the phone and applying the blue box to its mouthpiece once again. "We're up on a tandem, you can send yourself anywhere you want to go." He decides to check out London first. He chooses a certain pay phone located in Waterloo Station. This particular pay phone is popular with the phone-phreaks network because there are usually people walking by at all hours who will pick it up and talk for a while.

He presses the lower left-hand corner button which is marked "KP" on the face of the box.

"That's Key Pulse. It tells the tandem we're ready to give it instructions. First I'll punch out KP 182 START, which will slide us into the overseas sender in White Plains." I hear a neat clunk-cheep. "I think we'll head over to England by satellite. Cable is actually faster and the connection is somewhat better, but I like going by satellite. So I just punch out KP Zero 44. The Zero is supposed to guarantee a satellite connection and 44 is the country code for England. Okay...we're there. In Liverpool actually. Now all I have to do is punch out the London area code which is 1, and dial up the pay phone. Here, listen, I've got a ring now."

I hear the soft quick purr-purr of a London ring. Then someone picks up the phone. "Hello," says the London voice.

"Hello. Who's this?" Fraser asks.

"Hello. There's actually nobody here. I just picked this up while I was passing by. This is a public phone. There's no one here to answer actually."

"Hello. Don't hang up. I'm calling from the United States."

"Oh. What is the purpose of the call? This is a public phone you know."

"Oh. You know. To check out, uh, to find out what's going on in London. How is it there?"

"It's five o'clock in the morning. It's raining now."

"Oh. Who are you?"

The London passerby turns out to be an R.A.F. enlistee on his way back to the base in Lincolnshire, with a terrible hangover after a thirty-six-hour pass. He and Fraser talk about the rain. They agree that it's nicer when it's not raining. They say good-bye and Fraser hangs up.

His dime returns with a nice clink.

"Isn't that far out," he says grinning at me. "London. Like that."

Fraser squeezes the little blue box affectionately in his palm. "I told ya this thing is for real. Listen, if you don't mind I'm gonna try this girl I know in Paris. I usually give her a call around this time. It freaks her out. This time I'll use the — (a different rent-a-car company) 800 number and we'll go by overseas cable, 133 ; 33 is the country code for France, the 1 sends you by cable. Okay, here we go.... Oh damn. Busy. Who could she be talking to at this time?"

A state police car cruises slowly by the motel. The car does not stop, but Fraser gets nervous. We hop back into his car and drive ten miles in the opposite direction until we reach a Texaco station locked up for the night. We pull up to a phone booth by the tire pump. Fraser dashes inside and tries the Paris number. It is busy again.

"I don't understand who she could be talking to. The circuits may be busy. It's too bad I haven't learned how to tap into lines overseas with this thing yet."

Fraser begins to phreak around, as the phone phreaks say. He dials a leading nationwide charge card's 800 number and punches out the tones that bring him the Time recording in Sydney, Australia. He beeps up the Weather recording in Rome, in Italian of course. He calls a friend in Boston and talks about a certain over-the-counter stock they are into heavily. He finds the Paris number busy again. He calls up "Dial a Disc" in London, and we listen to *Double Barrel* by David and Ansil Collins, the number-one hit of the week in London. He calls up a dealer of another sort and talks in code. He calls up Joe Ingressia, the original blind phone-phreak genius, and pays his respects. There are other calls. Finally Fraser gets through to his young lady in Paris. They both agree the circuits must have been busy, and criticize the Paris telephone system. At two-thirty in the morning Fraser hangs up, pockets his dime, and drives off, steering with one hand, holding what he calls his "lovely little blue box" in the other.

YOU CAN CALL LONG DISTANCE FOR LESS THAN YOU THINK

"You see, a few years ago the phone company made one big mistake," Gilbertson explains two days later in his apartment. "They were careless enough to let some technical journal

publish the actual frequencies used to create all their multi-frequency tones. Just a theoretical article some Bell Telephone Laboratories engineer was doing about switching theory, and he listed the tones in passing. At — [a well-known technical school] I had been fooling around with phones for several years before I came across a copy of the journal in the engineering library. I ran back to the lab and it took maybe twelve hours from the time I saw that article to put together the first working blue box. It was bigger and clumsier than this little baby, but it worked."

It's all there on public record in that technical journal written mainly by Bell Lab people for other telephone engineers. Or at least it was public. "Just try and get a copy of that issue at some engineering-school library now. Bell has had them all red-tagged and withdrawn from circulation," Gilbertson tells me. "But it's too late. It's all public now. And once they became public the technology needed to create your own beeper device is within the range of any twelve-year-old kid, any twelve-year-old blind kid as a matter of fact. And he can do it in less than the twelve hours it took us. Blind kids do it all the time. They can't build anything as precise and compact as my beeper box, but theirs can do anything mine can do."

"How?"

"Okay. About twenty years ago A.T.&T. made a multibillion-dollar decision to operate its entire long-distance switching system on twelve electronically generated combinations of six master tones. Those are the tones you sometimes hear in the background after you've dialed a long-distance number. They decided to use some very simple tones—the tone for each number is just two fixed single-frequency tones played simultaneously to create a certain beat frequency. Like 1300 cycles per second and 900 cycles per second played together give you the tone for digit 5. Now, what some of these phone phreaks have done is get themselves access to an electric organ. Any cheap family home-entertainment edge now—one blind phone phreak has even had them recorded in one of those talking books for the blind—they just have to find the musical notes on the organ which correspond to the phone tones. Then they tape them. For instance, to get Ma Bell's tone for the number 1, you press down organ keys F-5 and A-5 [900 and 700 cycles per second] at

the same time. To produce the tone for 2 it's F-5 and C-6 (1100 and 700 c.p.s.). The phone phreaks circulate the whole list of notes so there's no trial and error anymore."

He shows me a list of the rest of the phone numbers and the two electric organ keys that produce them.

"Actually, you have to record these notes at 3 3/4 inches-per-second tape speed and double it to 7 1/2 inches-per-second when you play them back, to get the proper tones," he adds.

"So once you have all the tones recorded, how do you plug them into the phone system?"

"Well, they take their organ and their cassette recorder, and start banging out entire phone numbers in tones on the organ, including country codes, routing instructions, 'KP' and 'Start' tones. Or, if they don't have an organ, someone in the phone-phreak network sends them a cassette with all the tones recorded, with a voice saying 'Number one,' then you have the tone, 'Number two,' then the tone and so on. So with two cassette recorders they can put together a series of phone numbers by switching back and forth from number to number. Any idiot in the country with a cheap cassette recorder can make all the free calls he wants."

"You mean you just hold the cassette recorder up to the mouthpiece and switch in a series of beeps you've recorded? The phone thinks that anything that makes these tones must be its own equipment?"

"Right. As long as you get the frequency within thirty cycles per second of the phone company's tones, the phone equipment thinks it hears its own voice talking to it. The original granddaddy phone phreak was this blind kid with perfect pitch, Joe Engressia, who used to whistle into the phone. An operator could tell the difference between his whistle and the phone company's electronic tone generator, but the phone company's switching circuit can't tell them apart. The bigger the phone company gets and the further away from human operators it gets, the more vulnerable it becomes to all sorts of phone phreaking."

A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

"But wait a minute," I stop Gilbertson. "If everything you do sounds like phone-company equipment, why doesn't the phone company charge you for the call the way it charges its own equipment?"

"Okay. That's where the 2600-cycle tone comes in. I better start from the beginning."

The beginning he describes for me is a vision of the phone system of the continent as thousands of webs, of long-line trunks radiating from each of the hundreds of toll switching offices to the other toll switching offices. Each toll switching office is a hive compacted of thousands of long-distance tandems constantly whistling and beeping to tandems in far-off toll switching offices.

The tandem is the key to the whole system. Each tandem is a line with some relays with the capability of signaling any other tandem in any other toll switching office on the continent, either directly one-to-one or by programming a roundabout route through several other tandems if all the direct routes are busy. For instance, if you want to call from New York to Los Angeles and traffic is heavy on all direct trunks between the two cities, your tandem in New York is programmed to try the next best route, which may send you down to a tandem in New Orleans, then up to San Francisco, or down to a New Orleans tandem, back to an Atlanta tandem, over to an Albuquerque tandem and finally up to Los Angeles.

When a tandem is not being used, when it's sitting there waiting for someone to make a long-distance call, it whistles. One side of the tandem, the side "facing" your home phone, whistles at 2600 cycles per second toward all the home phones serviced by the exchange, telling them it is at their service, should they be interested in making a long-distance call. The other side of the tandem is whistling 2600 c.p.s. into one or more long-distance trunk lines, telling the rest of the phone system that it is neither sending nor receiving a call through that trunk at the moment, that it has no use for that trunk at the moment.

When you dial a long-distance number the first thing that happens is that you are hooked into a tandem. A register comes up to the side of the tandem facing away from you and presents that side with the number you dialed. This sending side of the tandem stops whistling 2600 into its trunk line. When a tandem stops the 2600 tone it has been sending through a trunk, the trunk is said to be "seized," and is now ready to carry the number you have dialed—converted into multi-frequency beep tones—to a tandem in the area code and central office you want.

Now when a blue-box operator wants to make a call from New Orleans to New York he starts by dialing the 800 number of a company

which might happen to have its headquarters in Los Angeles. The sending side of the New Orleans tandem stops sending 2600 out over the trunk to the central office in Los Angeles, thereby seizing the trunk. Your New Orleans tandem begins sending beep tones to a tandem it has discovered idly whistling 2600 cycles in Los Angeles. The receiving end of that L.A. tandem is seized, stops whistling 2600, listens to the beep tones which tell it which L.A. phone to ring, and starts ringing the 800 number. Meanwhile a mark made in the New Orleans office accounting tape notes that a call from your New Orleans phone to the 800 number in L.A. has been initiated and gives the call a code number. Everything is routine so far.

But then the phone phreak presses his blue box to the mouthpiece and pushes the 2600-cycle button, sending 2600 out from the New Orleans tandem to the L.A. tandem. The L.A. tandem notices 2600 cycles are coming over the line again and assumes that New Orleans has hung up because the trunk is whistling as if idle. The L.A. tandem immediately ceases ringing the L.A. 800 number. But as soon as the phreak takes his finger off the 2600 button, the L.A. tandem assumes the trunk is once again being used because the 2600 is gone, so it listens for a new series of digit tones—to find out where it must send the call.

Thus the blue-box operator in New Orleans now is in touch with a tandem in L.A. which is waiting like an obedient genie to be told what to do next. The blue-box owner then teeps out the ten digits of the New York number which tell the L.A. tandem to relay a call to New York City. Which it promptly does. As soon as your party picks up the phone in New York, the side of the New Orleans tandem facing you stops sending 2600 cycles to you and starts carrying his voice to you by way of the L.A. tandem. A notation is made on the accounting tape that the connection has been made on the 800 call which had been initiated and noted earlier. When you stop talking to New York a notation is made that the 800 call has ended.

At three the next morning, when the phone company's accounting computer starts reading back over the master accounting tape for the past day, it records that a call of a certain length of time was made from your New Orleans home to an L.A. 800 number and, of course, the accounting computer has been trained to ignore these toll-free 800 calls when compiling your monthly bill.

"All they can prove is that you made an 800

toll-free call," Gilbertson the inventor concludes. "Of course, if you're foolish enough to talk for two hours on an 800 call, and they've installed one of their special anti-fraud computer programs to watch out for such things, they may spot you and ask you why you took two hours talking to Army Recruiting's 800 number when you're 4-17? But if you do it from a pay phone, they may discover something peculiar the next day—if they've got a bluebox hunting program in their computer—but you'll be a long time gone from the pay phone by then. Using a pay phone is almost guaranteed safe."

"What about the recent series of blue-box arrests all across the country—New York, Cleveland, and so on?" I asked. "How were they caught so easily?"

"From what I can tell, they made one big mistake: they were seizing trunks using an area code plus 555 1512 instead of an 800 number. Using 555 is easy to detect because when you send multi-frequency beep tones off 555 you get a charge for it on your tape and the accounting computer knows there's something wrong when it tries to bill you for a two-hour call to Akron, Ohio, information, and it drops a trouble card which goes right into the hands of the security agent if they're looking for blue-box users.

"Whoever sold those guys their blue boxes didn't tell them how to use them properly, which is fairly irresponsible. And they were fairly stupid to use them at home all the time.

"But what these arrests really mean is that an awful lot of blue boxes are flooding into the country and that people are finding them so easy to make that they know how to make them before they know how to use them. Ma Bell is in trouble."

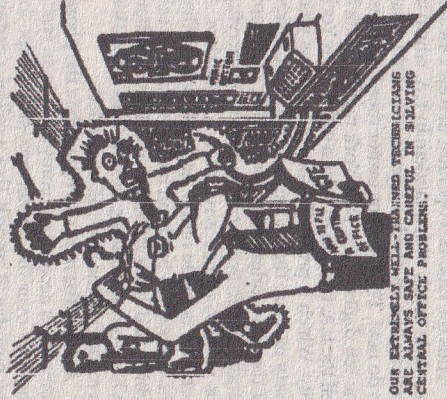
And if a blue-box operator or a cassette-recorder phone phreak sticks to pay phones and 800 numbers, the phone company can't stop them?

"Not unless they change their entire nationwide long-lines technology, which will take the next few billion dollars and twenty years. Right now they can't do a thing. They're screwed."

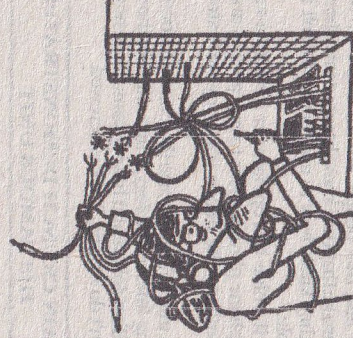
CAPTAIN CRUNCH DEMONSTRATES HIS FAMOUS UNIT

There is an underground telephone network in this country. Gilbertson discovered it the very day news of his activities hit the papers. That evening his phone began ringing. Phone phreaks from Seattle, from Florida, from New York, from San Jose, and from Los Angeles

④ Pathetic Telephone



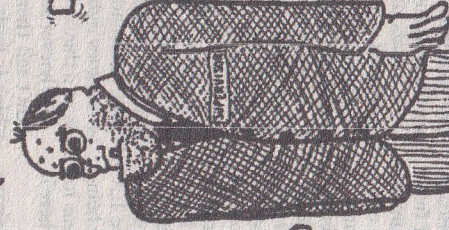
OUR EXTREMELY WELL-TRAINED TECHNICIANS ARE ALWAYS SAFE AND CAREFUL IN SOLVING CENTRAL OFFICE PROBLEMS.



OUR OPERATORS ARE EXPERIENCED AT THEIR JOBS TO AVOID FOUL-UPS AND PROVIDE THE CUSTOMER WITH FAST, EFFICIENT SERVICE.



OUR BUSINESS OFFICE PERSONNEL KEEP BEAT-UP AND ACCURATE RECORDS OF BILLS AND SERVICE AND ARE ALERT TO QUICKLY SOLVE YOUR PROBLEMS.



IN ADDITION... THEY ARE ALWAYS PLEASANT AND TRY TO SMILE AT ALL TIMES.



PLUS... THEY ARE COURTEOUS AND PATIENT EVEN WHEN PHOTOGRAPHING A COMPLEX OR AMUSING.

Deitel

member of the **SMELL SYSTEM**

began calling him and telling him about the phone-phreak network. He'd get a call from a phone phreak who'd say nothing but, "Hang up and call this number."

When he dialed the number he'd find himself tied into a conference of a dozen phone phreaks arranged through a quirky switching station in British Columbia. They identified themselves as phone phreaks, they demonstrated their homemade blue boxes which they called "M-F-ers" (for "multi-frequency," among other things) for him, they talked shop about phone-phreak devices. They let him in on their secrets on the theory that if the phone company was after him he must be trustworthy. And, Gilbertson recalls, they stunned him with their technical sophistication.

I ask him how to get in touch with the phone-phreak network. He digs around through a file of old schematics and comes up with about a dozen numbers in three widely separated area codes.

"Those are the centers," he tells me. Alongside some of the numbers he writes in first names or nicknames: names like Captain Crunch, Dr. No, Frank Carson (also a code word for free call), Marty Freeman (code word for M-F device), Peter Perpendicular Pimple, Alefnull, and The Cresshire Cat. He makes checks alongside the names of those among these top twelve who are blind. There are five checks.

I ask him who this Captain Crunch person is.

"Oh. The Captain. He's probably the most legendary phone phreak. He calls himself Captain Crunch after the notorious Cap'n Crunch 2600 whistle." (Several years ago, Gilbertson explains, the makers of Cap'n Crunch breakfast cereal offered a toy-whistle prize in every box as a treat for the Cap'n Crunch set. Somehow a phone phreak discovered that the toy whistle just happened to produce a perfect 2600-cycle tone. When the man who calls himself Captain Crunch was transferred overseas to England with his Air Force unit, he would receive scores of calls from his friends and "mute" them—make them free of charge to them—by blowing his Cap'n Crunch whistle into his end.)

"Captain Crunch is one of the older phone phreaks," Gilbertson tells me. "He's an engineer who once got in a little trouble for fooling around with the phone, but he can't stop. Well, this guy drives across country in a Volkswagen van with an entire switchboard and a computerized super-sophisticated M-F-er

in the back. He'll pull up to a phone booth on a lonely highway somewhere, snake a cable out of his bus, hook it onto the phone and sit for hours, days sometimes, sending calls zipping back and forth across the country, all over the world...."

Back at my motel, I dialed the number he gave me for "Captain Crunch" and asked for G---T---, his real name, or at least the name he uses when he's not dashing into a phone booth beeping out M-F tones faster than a speeding bullet, and zipping phatomlike through the phone company's long-distance lines.

When G---T--- answered the phone and I told him I was preparing a story for Esquire about phone phreaks, he became very indignant.

"I don't do that. I don't do that anymore at all. And if I do it, I do it for one reason and one reason only. I'm learning about a system. The phone company is a System. A computer is a System. Do you understand? If I do what I do, it is only to explore a System. Computers. Systems. That's my bag. The phone company is nothing but a computer."

A tone of tightly restrained excitement enters the Captain's voice when he starts talking about Systems. He begins to pronounce each syllable with the hushed deliberation of an obscene caller.

"Ma Bell is a system I want to explore. It's a beautiful system, you know, but Ma Bell screwed up. It's terrible because Ma Bell is such a beautiful system, but she screwed up. I learned how she screwed up from a couple of blind kids who wanted me to build a device. A certain device. They said it could make free calls. I wasn't interested in free calls. But when these blind kids told me I could make calls into a computer, my eyes lit up. I wanted to learn about computers. I wanted to learn about Ma Bell's computers. So I built the little device. Only I built it wrong and Ma Bell found out. Ma Bell can detect things like that. Ma Bell knows. So I'm strictly out of it now. I don't do it. Except for learning purposes." He pauses. "So you want to write an article. Are you paying for this call? Hang up and call this number."

He gives me a number in an area code a thousand miles north of his own. A dial the number

"Hello again. This is Captain Crunch. You are speaking to me on a toll-free long-around in Portland, Oregon. Do you know what a toll-

free loop-around is? I'll tell you."

He explains to me that almost every exchange in the country has open test numbers which allow other exchanges to test their connections with it. Most of these numbers occur in consecutive pairs, such as 302 956-0041 and 956-0042. Well, certain phone phreaks discovered that if two people from anywhere in the country dial those two consecutive numbers they can talk together just as if one had called the other's number, with no charge to either of them, of course.

"Your voice is looping around in a 4A switching machine up there in Canada, zip-ping back down to me," the Captain tells me. "My voice is looping around up there and back down to you. And it can't ever cost anyone money. The phone phreaks and I have compiled a list of many many of these numbers. You would be surprised if you saw the list. I could show it to you. But I won't. I'm out of that now. I'm not out to screw M/a Bell. I know better. If I do anything it's for the pure knowledge of the System. You can learn to do fantastic things. Have you ever heard eight tandems stacked up? Do you know the sound of tandems stacking and unstacking? Give me your phone number. Okay. Hang up now and wait a minute."

Slightly less than a minute later the phone rang and the Captain was on the line, his voice sounding far more excited, almost aroused.

"I wanted to show you what it's like to stack up tandems. To stack up tandems." (Whenever the Captain says "stack up" it sounds as if he is licking his lips.)

"How do you like the connection you're on now?" the Captain asks me. "It's a raw tandem. A raw tandem. Ain't nothin' up to it but a tandem. Now I'm going to show you what it's like to stack up. Blow off. Land in a faraway place. To stack that tandem up, whip back and forth across the country a few times, then shoot on up to Moscow."

"Listen," Captain Crunch continues. "Listen. I've got a line tie on my switchboard here, and I'm gonna let you hear me stack and unstack tandems. Listen to this. I'm gonna blow your mind."

First I hear a super rapid-fire pulsing of the flute-like phone tones, then a pause, then another popping burst of tones, then another, then another. Each burst is followed by a beep-kachink sound.

"We have now stacked up four tandems," said Captain Crunch, sounding somewhat

remote. "That's four tandems stacked up. Do you know what that means? That means I'm whipping back and forth, back and forth twice, across the country, before coming to you. I've been known to stack up twenty tandems at a time. Now, just like I said, I'm going to shoot up to Moscow."

There is a few, longer series of beeper pulses over the line, a brief silence, then a ring.

"Hello," answers a far-off voice.

"Hello. Is this the American Embassy Moscow?"

"Yes, sir. Who is this calling?" says the voice.

"Yes. This is test board here in New York. We're calling to check out the circuits, see what kind of lines you've got. Everything okay there in Moscow?"

"Okay?"

"Well, yes, how are things there?"

"Oh. Well, everything okay, I guess."

"Okay. Thank you." They hang up, leaving a confused series of beep-kachink sounds hanging in mid-ether in the wake of the call before dissolving away.

The Captain is pleased. "You believe me now, don't you? Do you know what I'd like to do? I'd like to call up your editor at Esquire and show him just what it sounds like to stack and unstack tandems. I'll give him a show that will *blow his mind*. What's his number?"

I ask the Captain what kind of device he was using to accomplish all his feats. The Captain is pleased at the question.

"You could tell it was special, couldn't you? Ten pulses per second. That's faster than the phone company's equipment. Believe me, this unit is the most famous unit in the country. There is no other unit like it. Believe me."

"Yes, I've heard about it. Some other phone phreaks have told me about it."

"They have been referring to my, ahem, unit? What is it they said? Just out of curiosity, did they tell you it was a highly sophisticated computer-operated unit, with acoustical coupling for receiving outputs and a switchboard with multiple-line-tie capability? Did they tell you that the frequency tolerance is guaranteed to be not more than .05 percent? The amplitude tolerance less than .01 decibel? Those pulses you heard were perfect. They just come faster than the phone company. Those were high-precision op-amps. Op-amps are instrumentation amplifiers designed for ultra-stable amplification, superlow distortion and accurate frequency response. Did

they tell you it can operate in temperatures from -55°C to $+125^{\circ}\text{C}$?"

I admit that they did not tell me all that.

"I built it myself," the Captain goes on. "If you were to go out and buy the components from an industrial wholesaler it would cost you at least \$1,500. I once worked for a semiconductor company and all this didn't cost me a cent. Do you know what I mean? Did they tell you about how I put a call completely around the world? I'll tell you how I did it. I M-F-ed Tokyo inward, who connected me to India, India connected me to Greece, Greece connected me to Pretoria, South Africa, South Africa connected me to South America, I went from South America to London, I had a London operator connect me to a New York operator, I had New York connect me to a California operator who rang the phone next to me. Needless to say I had to shout to hear myself. But the echo was far out. Fantastic. Delayed. It was delayed twenty seconds, but I could hear myself talk to myself."

"You mean you were speaking into the mouthpiece of one phone sending your voice around the world into your ear through a phone on the other side of your head?" I asked the Captain. I had a vision of something vaguely autoerotic going on, in a complex electronic way.

"That's right," said the Captain. "I've also sent my voice around the world one way, going east on one phone, and going west on the other, going through cable one way, satellite the other, coming back together at the same time, ringing the two phones simultaneously and picking them up and whipping my voice both ways around the world back to me. Wow. That was a mind blower."

"You mean you sit there with both phones on your ear and talk to yourself around the world," I said incredulously.

"Yeah. Um hum. That's what I do. I connect the phones together and sit there and talk."

"What do you say? What do you say to yourself when you're connected?"

"Oh, you know. Hello test one two three," he says in a low-pitched voice.

"Hello test one two three," he replies to himself in a high-pitched voice.

"Hello test one two three," he repeats again, low-pitched.

"Hello test one two three," he replies, high-pitched.

"I sometimes do this: *Hello hello hello, hello, hello*," he trails off and breaks into laughter.

WHY CAPTAIN CRUNCH HARDLY EVER TAPS PHONES ANYMORE

Using internal phone-company codes, phone phreaks have learned a simple method for tapping phones. Phonecompany operators have in front of them a board that holds verification jacks. It allows them to plug into conversations in case of emergency, to listen in to a line to determine if the line is busy or the circuits are busy. Phone phreaks have learned to beep out the codes which lead them to a verification operator, tell the verification operator they are switchmen from some other area code testing out verification trunks. Once the operator hooks them into the verification trunk, they disappear into the board for all practical purposes, slip unnoticed into any one of the 10,000 to 100,000 numbers in that central office without the verification operator knowing what they're doing, and of course without the two parties to the connection knowing there is a phantom listener present on their line.

Toward the end of my hour-long first conversation with him, I asked the Captain if he ever tapped phones.

"Oh no. I don't do that. I don't think it's right," he told me firmly. "I have the power to do it but I don't.... Well one time, just one time, I have to admit that I did. There was this girl Linda, and I wanted to find out... you know. I tried to call her up for a date. I had a date with her the last weekend and I thought she liked me. I called her up, man, and her line was busy, and I kept calling and it was still busy. Well, I had just learned about this system of jumping into lines and I said to myself, 'Hmmm. Why not just see if it works. It'll surprise her if all of a sudden I should pop up on her line. It'll impress her, if anything.' So I went ahead and did it. I M-F-ed into the line. My M-F-er is powerful enough when patched directly into the mouthpiece to trigger a verification trunk without using an operator the way the other phone phreaks have to."

"I slipped into the line and there she was talking to another boyfriend. Making sweet talk to him. I didn't make a sound because I was so disgusted. So I waited there for her to hang up, listening to her making sweet talk to another guy. You know. So as soon as she hung up I instantly M-F-ed her up and all I said was, 'Linda, we're through.' And I hung up. And it blew her head off. She couldn't figure out what the hell had happened."

"But that was the only time. I did it thinking I would surprise her, impress her. Those were all my intentions were, and well, it really kind of hurt me pretty badly, and...and ever since then I don't go into verification trunks."

Moments later my first conversation with the Captain comes to a close.

"Listen," he says, his spirits somewhat cheered, "listen. What you are going to hear when I hang up is the sound of tandems unstacking. Layer after layer of tandems unstacking until there's nothing left of the stack, until it melts away into nothing. Cheep, cheep, cheep, cheep," he concludes, his voice descending to a whisper with each cheep.

He hangs up. The phone suddenly goes into four spasms: kachink cheep. Kachink cheep kachink cheep kachink cheep, and the complex connection has wiped itself out like the Cheshire cat's smile.

THE MF BOOGIE BLUES

The next number I choose from the select list of phonephreak illuminati prepared for me by the blue-box inventor is a Memphis number. It is the number of Joe Engressia, the first and still perhaps the most accomplished blind phone phreak.

Three years ago Engressia was a nine-day wonder in newspapers and magazines all over America because he had been discovered whistling free long-distance connections for fellow students at the University of South Florida. Engressia was born with perfect pitch; he could whistle phone tones better than the phone-company equipment.

Engressia might have gone on whistling in the dark for a few friends for the rest of his life if the phone company hadn't decided to expose him. He was warned, disciplined by the college, and the whole case became public. In the months following media reports of his talent, Engressia began receiving strange calls. There were calls from a group of kids in Los Angeles who could do some very strange things with the quirky General Telephone and Electronics circuitry in L.A. suburbs. There were calls from a group of mostly blind kids in —, California, who had been doing some interesting experiments with Cap'n Crunch whistles and test loops. There was a group in Seattle, a group in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a few from New York, a few scattered across the country. Some of them had already equipped themselves with cassette and elec-

tronic M-F devices. For some of these groups, it was the first time they knew of the others.

The exposure of Engressia was the catalyst that linked the separate phone-phreak centers together. They all called Engressia. They talked to him about what he was doing and what they were doing. And then he told them—the scattered regional centers and lonely independent phone phreakers—about each other, gave them each other's numbers to call, and within a year the scattered phonephreak centers had grown into a nationwide underground.

Joe Engressia is only twenty-two years old now, but along the phone-phreak network he is "the old man," accorded by phone phreaks something of the reverence the phone company bestows on Alexander Graham Bell. He seldom needs to make calls anymore. The phone phreaks all call him and let him know what new tricks, new codes, new techniques they have learned. Every night he sits like a sightless spider in his little apartment receiving messages from every tendril of his web. It is almost a point of pride with Joe that *they* call him.

But when I reached him in his Memphis apartment that night, Joe Engressia was lonely, jumpy and upset.

"God, I'm glad somebody called. I don't know why tonight of all nights I don't get any calls. This guy around here got drunk again tonight and propositioned me again. I keep telling him we'll never see eye to eye on this subject, if you know what I mean. I try to make light of it, you know, but he doesn't get it. I can hear him out there getting drunker and I don't know what he'll do next. It's just that I'm really all alone here. I just moved to Memphis, it's the first time I'm living out on my own, and I'd hate for it to all collapse now. But I won't go to bed with him. I'm just not very interested in sex and even if I can't see him I *know* he's ugly."

"Did you hear that? That's him banging a bottle against the wall outside. He's nice. Well forget about it. You're doing a story on phone phreaks? Listen to this. It's the *MF Boogie* blues."

Sure enough, a jumpy version of Muskrat Ramble boogies its way over the line, each note one of those long-distance phone tones. The music stops. A huge roaring voice blasts the phone off my ear: "AND THE QUESTION IS...roars the voice, "CAN A BLIND PERSON HOOK UP AN AMPLIFIER ON HIS OWN?"

The roar ceases. A high-pitched operator-type voice replaces it. "This is Southern Braille Tel. & Tel. Have tone, will phone."

This is succeeded by a quick series of M-F tones, a swift "kachink" and a deep reassuring voice: "If you need home care, call the visiting-nurses association. First National time in Honolulu is 4:32 p.m."

Joe back in his Joe voice again: "Are we seeing eye to eye? *Sí, sí*," said the blind Mexican. Ahem. Yes. Would you like to know the weather in Tokyo?"

This swift manic sequence of phone-phreak vaudeville stunts and blind-boy jokes manages to keep Joe's mind off his tormentor only as long as it lasts.

"The reason I'm in Memphis, the reason I have to depend on that homosexual guy, is that this is the first time I've been able to live on my own and make phone trips on my own. I've been banned from all central offices around home in Florida, they knew me too well, and at the University some of my fellow scholars were always harassing me because I was on the dorm pay phone all the time and making fun of me because of my fat ass, which of course I do have, it's my physical fatness program, but I don't like to hear it every day, and if I can't phone trip and I can't phone phreak, I can't imagine what I'd do, I've been devoting three quarters of my life to it.

"I moved to Memphis because I wanted to be on my own as well as because it has a Number 5 crossbar switching system and some interesting little independent phone-company districts nearby and so far they don't seem to know who I am so I can go on phone tripping, and for me phone tripping is just as important as phone phreaking."

Phone tripping, Joe explains, begins with calling up a central-office switch room. He tells the switchman in a polite earnest voice that he's a blind college student interested in telephones, and could he perhaps have a guided tour of the switching station? Each step of the tour Joe likes to touch and feel relays, caress switching circuits, switchboards, crossbar arrangements.

So when Joe Engressia phone phreaks he feels his way through the circuitry of the country garden of forking paths, he feels switches shift, relays shunt, crossbars swivel, tandems engage and disengage even as he hears—with perfect pitch—his M-F pulses make the entire Bell system dance to his tune.

Just one month ago Joe took all his sav-

ings out of his bank and left home, over the emotional protests of his mother. "I ran away from home almost," he likes to say. Joe found a small apartment house on Union Avenue and began making phone trips. He'd take a bus a hundred miles south into Mississippi to see some old-fashioned Bell equipment still in use in several states, which had been puzzling. He'd take a bus three hundred miles to Charlotte, North Carolina, to look at some brand-new experimental equipment. He hired a taxi to drive him twelve miles to a suburb to tour the office of a small phone company with some interesting idiosyncracies in its routing system. He was having the time of his life, he said, the most freedom and pleasure he had known.

In that month he had done very little long-distance phone phreaking from his own phone. He had begun to apply for a job with the phone company, he told me, and he wanted to stay away from anything illegal.

"Any kind of job will do, anything as menial as the most lowly operator. That's probably all they'd give me because I'm blind. Even though I probably knew more than most switchmen. But that's okay. I want to work for Ma Bell. I don't hate Ma Bell the way Gilbertson and some phone phreaks do. I don't want to screw Ma Bell. With me it's the pleasure of pure knowledge. There's something beautiful about the system when you know it intimately the way I do. But I don't know how much they know about me here. I have a very intuitive feel for the condition of the line I'm on, and I think they're monitoring me off and on lately, but I haven't been doing much illegal. I *have* to make a few calls to switchmen once in a while which aren't strictly legal, and once I took an acid trip and was having these auditory hallucinations as if I were trapped and these planes were dive-bombing me, and all of a sudden I *had* to phone phreak out of there. For some reason I had to call Kansas City, but that's all."

A WARNING IS DELIVERED

At this point—one o'clock in my time zone—a loud knock on my motel-room door interrupts our conversation. Outside the door I find a uniformed security guard who informs me that there has been an "emergency phone call" for me while I have been on the line and that the front desk has sent him up to let me know.

Two seconds after I say good-bye to Joe and hang up, the phone rings.

"Who were you talking to?" the agitated voice demands. The voice belongs to Captain Crunch. "I called because I decided to warn you of something. I decided to warn you to be careful. I don't want this information you get to get to the radical underground. I don't want it to get into the wrong hands. What would you say if I told you it's possible for three phone phreaks to saturate the phone system of the nation. Saturate it. Busy it out. All of it. I know how to do this. I'm not gonna tell. I friend of mine has already saturated the trunks between Seattle and New York. He did it with a computerized M-F'er hitched into a special Manitoba exchange. But there are other, easier ways to do it."

Just three people? I ask. How is that possible?

"Have you ever heard of the long-lines guard frequency? Do you know about stacking tandems with 17 and 2600? Well, I'd advise you to find out about it. I'm not gonna tell you. But whatever you do, don't let this get into the hands of the radical underground."

(Later Gilbertson the inventor confessed that while he had always been skeptical about the Captain's claim of the sabotage potential of trunk-tying phone phreaks, he had recently heard certain demonstrations which convinced him the Captain was not speaking idly. "I think it might take more than three people, depending on how many machines like Captain Crunch's were available. But even though the Captain *sounds* a little weird, he generally turns out to know what he's talking about.")

"You know," Captain Crunch continues in his admonitory tone, "you know the younger phone phreaks call Moscow all the time. Suppose everybody were to call Moscow. I'm no right-winger. But I value my life. I don't want the Commies coming over and dropping a bomb on my head. That's why I say you've got to be careful about who gets this information."

The Captain suddenly shifts into a diatribe against those phone phreaks who don't like the phone company.

"They don't understand, but Ma Bell knows everything they do. Ma Bell knows. Listen, is this line hot? I just heard someone tap in. I'm not paranoid, but I can detect things like that. Well, even if it is, they know that I know that they know that I have a bulk eraser. I'm very clean." The Captain pauses, evidently torn between wanting to prove to the phone-company monitors that he does nothing illegal,

and the desire to impress Ma Bell with his prowess. "Ma Bell knows the things I can do," he continues. "Ma Bell knows how good I am. And I am *quite* good. I can detect reversals, tandem switching, everything that goes on on a line. I have relative pitch now. Do you know what that *means*? My ears are a \$20,000 piece of equipment. With my ears I can detect things they can't hear with their equipment. I've had employment problems. I've lost jobs. But I want to show Ma Bell how good I am. I don't want to screw her, I want to work for her. I want to do good for her. I want to help her get rid of her flaws and become perfect. That's my number-one goal in life now." The Captain concludes his warnings and tells me he has to be going. "I've got a little action lined up for tonight," he explains and hangs up.

Before I hang up for the night, I call Joe Engressia back. He reports that his tormentor has finally gone to sleep—"He's not *blind* drunk, that's the way I get, ahem, yes; but you might say he's in a drunken stupor." I make a date to visit Joe in Memphis in two days.

A PHONE PHREAK CELL. TAKES CARE OF BUSINESS

The next morning I attend a gathering of four phone phreaks in — (a California suburb). The gathering takes place in a comfortable split-level home in an upper-middle-class subdivision. Heaped on the kitchen table are the portable cassette recorders, M-F cassettes, phone patches, and line ties of the four phone phreaks present. On the kitchen counter next to the telephone is a shoe-box-size blue box with thirteen large toggle switches for the tones. The parents of the host phone phreak, Ralph, who is blind, stay in the living room with their sighted children. They are not sure exactly what Ralph and his friends do with the phone or if it's strictly legal, but he is blind and they are pleased he has a hobby which keeps him busy.

The group has been working at reestablishing the historic "2111" conference, reopening some toll-free loops, and trying to discover the dimensions of what seem to be new initiatives against phone phreaks by phone-company security agents.

It is not long before I get a chance to see, to hear, Randy at work. Randy is known among the phone phreaks as perhaps the finest con man in the game. Randy is blind. He is pale,

soft and pear-shaped, he wears baggy pants and a wrinkly nylon white sport shirt, pushes his head forward from hunched shoulders somewhat like a turtle inching out of its shell. His eyes wander, crossing and recrossing, and his forehead is somewhat pimply. He is only sixteen years old.

But when Randy starts speaking into a telephone mouthpiece his voice becomes so stunningly authoritative it is necessary to look again to convince yourself it comes from chubby adolescent Randy. Imagine the voice of a crack oil-rig foreman, a tough, sharp, weatherbeaten Marlboro man of forty. Imagine the voice of a brilliant performance-fund gunslinger explaining how he beats the Dow Jones by thirty percent. Then imagine a voice that could make those two sound like Stepin Fetchit. That is sixteen-year-old Randy's voice.

He is speaking to a switchman in Detroit. The phone company in Detroit had closed up two toll-free loop pairs for no apparent reason, although heavy use by phone phreaks all over the country may have been detected. Randy is telling the switchman how to open up the loop and make it free again:

"How are you, buddy. Yeah, I'm on the board in here in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and we've been trying to run some tests on your loop-abouts, and we find 'em busied out on both sides.... Yeah, we've been getting a 'BY' on them, what d'ya say, can you drop cards on 'em? Do you have 08 on your number group? Oh that's okay, we've had this trouble before, we may have to go after the circuit. Here, lemme give 'em to you: your frame is 05, vertical group 03, horizontal 5, vertical file 3. Yeah, we'll hang on here.... Okay, found it? Good. Right, yeah, we'd like to clear that busy out. Right. All you have to do is look for your key on the mounting plate, it's in your miscellaneous trunk frame. Okay? Right. Now pull your key from NOR over to LCT. Yeah. I don't know why that happened, but we've been having trouble with that one. Okay. Thanks a lot, fella. Be seein' ya."

Randy hangs up, reports that the switchman was a little inexperienced with the loop-around circuits on the miscellaneous trunk frame, but that the loop has been returned to its free-call status.

Delighted, phone phreak Ed returns the pair of numbers to the active-status column in his directory. Ed is a superb and painstaking researcher. With almost Talmudic thoroughness he will trace tendrils of hints through soft-wired mazes of intervening phone-com-

pany circuitry back through complex linkages of switching relays to find the location and identity of just one toll-free loop. He spends hours and hours, every day, doing this sort of thing. He has somehow compiled a directory of eight hundred "Band-six in-WATS numbers" located in over forty states. Band-six in-WATS numbers are the big 800 numbers—the ones that can be dialed into free from anywhere in the country.

Ed the researcher, a nineteen-year-old engineering student, is also a superb technician. He put together his own working blue box from scratch at age seventeen. (He is sighted.) This evening after distributing the latest issue of his in-WATS directory (which has been typed into Braille for the blind phone phreaks), he announces he has made a major new breakthrough:

"I finally tested it and it works, perfectly. I've got this switching matrix which converts any touch-tone phone into an M-F'er."

The tones you hear in touch-tone phones are not the M-F tones that operate the long-distance switching system. Phone phreaks believe A.T.&T. had deliberately equipped touch tones with a different set of frequencies to avoid putting the six master M-F tones in the hands of every touch-tone owner. Ed's complex switching matrix puts the six master tones, in effect puts a blue box, in the hands of every touch-tone owner.

Ed shows me pages of schematics, specifications and parts lists. "It's not easy to build, but everything here is in the Heathkit catalog."

Ed asks Ralph what progress he has made in his attempts to reestablish a long-term open conference line for phone phreaks. The last big conference—the historic "2111" conference—had been arranged through an unused Telex test-board trunk somewhere in the innards of a 4A switching machine in Vancouver, Canada. For months phone phreaks could M-F their way into Vancouver, beep out 604 (the Vancouver area code) and then beep out 2111 (the internal phone-company code for Telex testing), and find themselves at any time, day or night, on an open wire talking with an array of phone phreaks from coast to coast, operators from Bermuda, Tokyo and London who are phone-phreak sympathizers, and miscellaneous guests and technical experts. The conference was a massive exchange of information. Phone phreaks picked each other's brains clean, then developed new ways to pick the phone company's brains clean. Ralph

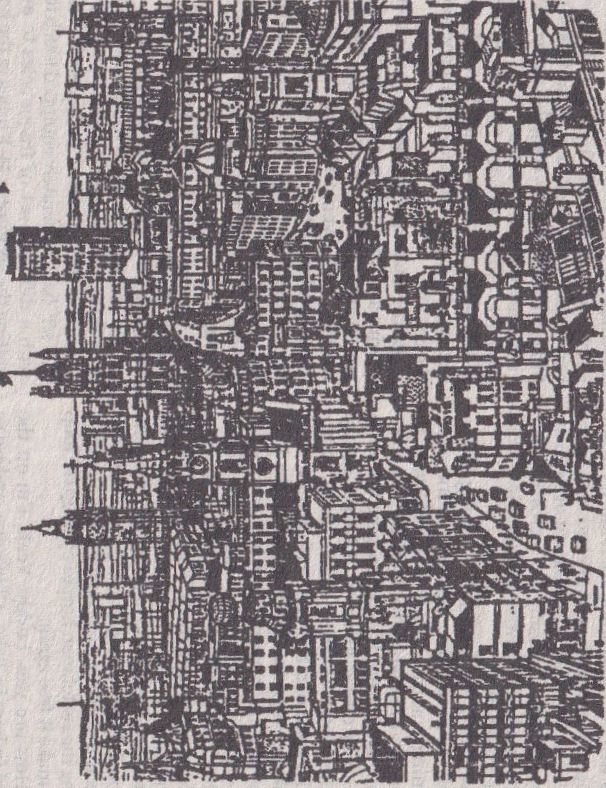
// LEARN WHAT THOSE LITTLE
CODE NUMBERS AT THE TOP OF
YOUR TELEPHONE BILL MEAN
TO YOU.

// HOW ARE YOU SO SURE THAT
YOU WILL GET A DIAL TONE
EVERY TIME YOU PICK UP THE
TELEPHONE HANDSET?



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Isn't it a pity
when no one's at home...
...in such a large city
to answer their phone—



gave *M-F Boogie* concerts with his home-entertainment-type electric organ, Captain Crunch demonstrated his round-the-world prowess with his notorious computerized unit and dropped leering hints of the "action" he was getting with his girl friends. (The Captain lives out or pretends to live out several kinds of fantasies to the gossipy delight of the blind phone phreaks who urge him on to further triumphs on behalf of all of them.) The somewhat rowdy Northwest phone-phreak crowd let their bitter internal feud spill over into the peaceable conference line, escalating shortly into guerrilla warfare; Carl the East Coast international tone relations expert demonstrated newly opened direct M-F routes to central offices on the island of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, introduced a new phone-phreak friend of his in Pretoria, and explained the technical operation of the new Oakland-to-Vietnam linkages. (Many phone phreaks pick up spending money by M-F-ing calls from relatives to Vietnam G.I.'s, charging \$5 for a whole hour of trans-Pacific conversation.)

Day and night the conference line was never dead. Blind phone phreaks all over the country, lonely and isolated in homes filled with active sighted brothers and sisters, or trapped with slow and unimaginative blind kids in strait-jacket schools for the blind, knew that no matter how late it got they could dial up the conference and find instant electronic communion with two or three other blind kids awake over on the other side of America. Talking together on a phone hookup, the blind phone phreaks say, is not much different from being there together. Physically, *there* was nothing more than a two-inch-square wafer of titanium inside a vast machine on Vancouver Island. For the blind kids *there* meant an exhilarating feeling of being *in touch*, through a kind of skill and magic which was peculiarly their own.

Last April 1, however, the long Vancouver Conference was shut off. The phone phreaks knew it was coming. Vancouver was in the process of converting from a step-by-step system to a 4A machine and the 2111 Telex circuit was to be wiped out in the process. The phone phreaks learned the actual day on which the conference would be erased about a week ahead of time over the phone company's internal-news-and-shop-talk recording.

For the next frantic seven days every phone phreak in America was on and off the 2111 conference twenty-four hours a day. Phone phreaks who were just learning the game or

didn't have M-F capability were boosted up to the conference by more experienced phreaks so they could get a glimpse of what it was like before it disappeared. Top phone phreaks searched distant area codes for new conference possibilities without success. Finally in the early morning of April 1, the end came.

"I could feel it coming a couple hours before midnight," Ralph remembers. "You could feel something going on in the lines. Some static began showing up, then some whistling wheezing sound. Then there were breaks. Some people got cut off and called right back in, but after a while some people were finding they were cut off and couldn't get back in at all. It was terrible. I lost it about one a.m., but managed to slip in again and stay on until the thing died...I think it was about four in the morning. There were four of us still hanging on when the conference disappeared into nowhere for good. We all tried to M-F up to it again of course, but we got silent termination. There was nothing there."

THE LEGENDARY MARK BERNAY TURNS OUT TO BE "THE MIDNIGHT SKULKER"

Mark Bernay. I had come across that name before. It was on Gilbertson's select list of phone phreaks. The California phone phreaks had spoken of a mysterious Mark Bernay as perhaps the first and oldest phone phreak on the West Coast. And in fact almost every phone phreak in the West can trace his origins either directly to Mark Bernay or to a disciple of Mark Bernay.

It seems that five years ago this Mark Bernay (a pseudonym he chose for himself) began traveling up and down the West Coast pasting tiny stickers in phone books all along his way. The stickers read something like "Want to hear an interesting tape recording? Call these numbers." The numbers that followed were toll-free loop-around pairs. When one of the curious called one of the numbers he would hear a tape recording pre-hooked into the loop by Bernay which explained the use of looparound pairs, gave the numbers of several more, and ended by telling the caller, "At six o'clock tonight this recording will stop and you and your friends can try it out. Have fun."

"I was disappointed by the response at first," Bernay told me, when I finally reached him at one of his many numbers and he had dispensed with the usual "I never do anything

illegal" formalities with which experienced phone phreaks open most conversations. "I went all over the coast with these stickers not only on pay phones, but I'd throw them in front of high schools in the middle of the night, I'd leave them unobtrusively in candy stores, scatter them on main streets of small towns. At first hardly anyone bothered to try it out. I would listen in for hours and hours after six o'clock and no one came on. I couldn't figure out why people wouldn't be interested. Finally these two girls in Oregon tried it out and told all their friends and suddenly it began to spread."

Before his Johnny Appleseed trip Bernay had already gathered a sizable group of early pre-blue-box phone phreaks together on loop-arounds in Los Angeles. Bernay does not claim credit for the original discovery of the loop-around numbers. He attributes the discovery to an eighteen-year-old reform-school kid in Long Beach whose name he forgets and who, he says, "just disappeared one day." When Bernay himself discovered loop-arounds independently, from clues in his readings in old issues of the *Automatic Electric Technical Journal*, he found dozens of the reform-school kid's friends already using them. However, it was one of Bernay's disciples in Seattle that introduced phone phreaking to blind kids. The Seattle kid who learned about loops through Bernay's recording told a blind friend, the blind kid taught the secret to his friends at a winter camp for blind kids in Los Angeles. When the camp session was over these kids took the secret back to towns all over the West. This is how the original blind kids became phone phreaks. For them, for most phone phreaks in general, it was the discovery of the possibilities of loop-arounds which led them on to far more serious and sophisticated phonephreak methods, and which gave them a medium for sharing their discoveries.

A year later a blind kid who moved back east brought the technique to a blind kids' summer camp in Vermont, which spread it along the East Coast. All from a Mark Bernay sticker.

Bernay, who is nearly thirty years old now, got his start when he was fifteen and his family moved into an L.A. suburb serviced by General Telephone and Electronics equipment. He became fascinated with the differences between Bell and G.T.&E. equipment. He learned he could make interesting

things happen by carefully timed clicks with the disengage button. He learned to interpret subtle differences in the array of clicks, whirs and kachinks he could hear on his lines. He learned he could shift himself around the switching relays of the L.A. area code in a not-too-predictable fashion by interspersing his own hook-switch clicks with the clicks within the line. (Independent phone companies—there are nineteen hundred of them still left, most of them tiny island principalities in Ma Bell's vast empire—have always been favored with phone phreaks, first as learning tools, then as Archimedes platforms from which to manipulate the huge Bell system. A phone phreak in Bell territory will often M-F himself into an independent's switching system, with switching idiosyncrasies which can give him marvelous leverage over the Bell System.

"I have a real affection for Automatic Electric equipment," Bernay told me. "There are a lot of things you can play with. Things break down in interesting ways."

Shortly after Bernay graduated from college (with a double major in chemistry and philosophy), he graduated from phreaking around with G.T.&E. to the Bell System itself, and made his legendary sticker-pasting journey north along the coast, settling finally in Northwest Pacific Bell territory. He discovered that if Bell does not break down as interestingly as G.T.&E., it nevertheless offers a lot of "things to play with."

Bernay learned to play with blue boxes. He established his own personal switchboard and phone-phreak research laboratory complex. He continued his phone-phreak evangelism with ongoing sticker campaigns. He set up two recording numbers, one with instructions for beginning phone phreaks, the other with latest news and technical developments (along with some advanced instruction) gathered from sources all over the country.

These days, Bernay told me, he had gone beyond phone-phreaking itself. "Lately I've been enjoying playing with computers more than playing with phones. My personal thing in computers is just like with phones, I guess—the kick is in finding out how to beat the system, how to get at things I'm not supposed to know about, how to do things with the system that I'm not supposed to be able to do."

As a matter of fact, Bernay told me, he had just been fired from his computer-program-

ming job for doing things he was not supposed to be able to do. He had been working with a huge timesharing computer owned by a large corporation but shared by many others. Access to the computer was limited to those programmers and corporations that had been assigned certain passwords. And each password restricted its user to access to only one section of the computer cordoned off from its own information storager. The password system prevented companies and individuals from stealing each other's information.

"I figured out how to write a program that would let me read everyone else's password," Bernay reports. "I began playing around with passwords. I began letting the people who used the computer know, in subtle ways, that I knew their passwords. I began dropping notes to the computer supervisors with hints that I knew what I know. I signed them 'The Midnight Skulker.' I kept getting cleverer and cleverer with my messages and devising ways of showing them what I could do. I'm sure they couldn't imagine I could do the things I was showing them. But they never responded to me. Every once in a while they'd change the passwords, but I found out how to discover what the new ones were, and I let them know. But they never responded directly to The Midnight Skulker. I even finally designed a program which they could use to prevent my program from finding out what it did. In effect I told them how to wipe me out, The Midnight Skulker. It was a very clever program. I started leaving clues about myself. I wanted them to try and use it and then try to come up with something to get around that and reappear again. But they wouldn't play. I wanted to get caught. I mean I didn't want to get caught personally, but I wanted them to notice me and admit that they noticed me. I wanted them to attempt to respond, maybe in some interesting way."

Finally the computer managers became concerned enough about the threat of information-stealing to respond. However, instead of using The Midnight Skulker's own elegant self-destruct program, they called in their security personnel, interrogated everyone, found an informer to identify Bernay as The Midnight Skulker, and fired him.

"At first the security people advised the company to hire me full-time to search out other flaws and discover other computer freaks. I might have liked that. But I probably would have turned into a double double

agent rather than the double agent they wanted. I might have resurrected The Midnight Skulker and tried to catch myself. Who knows? Anyway, the higher-ups turned the whole idea down."

YOU CAN TAP THE F.B.I.'S CRIME CONTROL COMPUTER IN THE COMFORT OF YOUR OWN HOME, PERHAPS

Computer freaking may be the wave of the future. It suits the phone-phreak sensibility perfectly. Gilbertson, the blue-box inventor and a lifelong phone phreak, has also gone on from phonephreaking to computer-freaking. Before he got into the blue-box business Gilbertson, who is a highly skilled programmer, devised programs for international currency arbitrage.

But he began playing with computers in earnest when he learned he could use his blue box in tandem with the computer terminal installed in his apartment by the instrumentation firm he worked for. The print-out terminal and keyboard was equipped with acoustical coupling, so that by coupling his little ivory Princess phone to the terminal and then coupling his blue box on that, he could M-F his way into other computers with complete anonymity, and without charge; program and re-program them at will; feed them false or misleading information; tap and steal from them. He explained to me that he taps computers by busying out all the lines, then going into a verification trunk, listening into the passwords and instructions one of the time sharers uses, and then M-F-ing in and imitating them. He believes it would not be impossible to creep into the F.B.I.'s crime control computer through a local police computer terminal and phreak around with the F.B.I.'s memory banks. He claims he has succeeded in re-programming a certain huge institutional computer in such a way that it has cordoned off an entire section of its circuitry for his personal use, and at the same time conceals the arrangement from anyone else's notice. I have been unable to verify this claim.

Like Captain Crunch, like Alexander Graham Bell (pseudonym of a disgruntled-looking East Coast engineer who claims to have invented the black box and now sells black and blue boxes to gamblers and radical heavies), like most phone phreaks, Gilbertson began his career trying to rip

off pay phones as a teen-ager. Figure them out, then rip them off. Getting his dime back from the pay phone is the phone phreak's first thrilling rite of passage. After learning the usual eighteen different ways of getting his dime back, Gilbertson learned how to make master keys to coin-phone cash boxes, and get everyone else's dimes back. He stole some phone-company equipment and put together his own home switchboard with it. He learned to make a simple "breadbox" device, of the kind used by bookies in the Thirties (bookie gives a number to his betting clients; the phone with that number is installed in some widow lady's apartment, but is rigged to ring in the bookie's shop across town, cops trace big betting number and find nothing but the widow).

Not long after that afternoon in 1968 when, deep in the stacks of an engineering library, he came across a technical journal with the phone tone frequencies and rushed off to make his first blue box, not long after that Gilbertson abandoned a very promising career in physical chemistry and began selling blue boxes for \$1,500 apiece.

"I had to leave physical chemistry. I just ran out of interesting things to learn," he told me one evening. We had been talking in the apartment of the man who served as the link between Gilbertson and the syndicate in arranging the big \$300,000 blue-box deal which fell through because of legal trouble. There had been some smoking.

"No more interesting things to learn," he continues. "Physical chemistry turns out to be a sick subject when you take it to its highest level. I don't know. I don't think I could explain to you how it's sick. You have to be there. But you get, I don't know, a false feeling of omnipotence. I suppose it's like phone-phreaking that way. This huge thing is there. This whole system. And there are holes in it and you slip into them like Alice and you're pretending you're doing something you're actually not, or at least it's no longer *you* that's doing what you thought you were doing. It's all Lewis Carroll. Physical chemistry and phone-phreaking. That's why you have these phone-phreak pseudonyms like The Cheshire Cat, The Red King, and The Snark. But there's something about phone-phreaking that you don't find in physical chemistry." He looks up at me:

"Did you ever steal anything?"

Well yes, I—

"Then you know! You know the rush you get. It's not just knowledge, like physical chemistry. It's forbidden knowledge. You know. You can learn about anything under the sun and be bored to death with it. But the idea that it's illegal. Look: you can be small and mobile and smart and you're ripping off somebody large and powerful and very dangerous."

People like Gilbertson and Alexander Graham Bell are always talking about ripping off the phone company and screwing Ma Bell. But if they were shown a single button and told that by pushing it they could turn the entire circuitry of A.T.&T. into molten puddles, they probably wouldn't push it. The disgruntled-inventor phone phreak needs the phone system the way the lapsed Catholic needs the Church, the way Satan needs a God, the way The Midnight Skulker needed, more than anything else, response.

Later that evening Gilbertson finished telling me how delighted he was at the flood of blue boxes spreading throughout the country, how delighted he was to know that "this time they're really screwed." He suddenly shifted gears.

"Of course, I do have this love/hate thing about Ma Bell. In a way I almost *like* the phone company. I guess I'd be very sad if they were to go away or if their services were to disintegrate. In a way it's just that after having been so good they turn out to have these things wrong with them. It's those flaws that allow me to get in and mess with them, but I don't know. There's something about it that gets to you and makes you want to *get to it*, you know."

I ask him what happens when he runs out of interesting, forbidden things to learn about the phone system.

"I don't know, maybe I'd go to work for them for a while."

In security even?

"I'd do it, sure. I just as soon play—I'd just as soon work on either side."

Even figuring out how to trap phone phreaks? I said, recalling Mark Bernay's game.

"Yes, that might be interesting. Yes, I could figure out how to outwit the phone phreaks. Of course if I got too good at it, it might become boring again. Then I'd have to hope the phone phreaks got much better and outsmarted me for a while. That would move the quality of the game up one level. I might

even have to help them out, you know, 'Well kids, I wouldn't want this to get around but did you ever think of—?' I could keep it going at higher and higher levels forever.'

The dealer speaks up for the first time. He has been staring at the soft blinking patterns of lights and colors on the translucent tiled wall facing him. (Actually there are no patterns: the color and illumination of every tile is determined by a computerized random-number generator designed by Gilbertson which insures that there can be no meaning to any sequence of events in the tiles.)

"Those are nice games you're talking about," says the dealer to his friend. "But I wouldn't mind seeing them screwed. A telephone isn't private anymore. You can't say anything you really want to say on a telephone or you have to go through that paranoid bulls— 'Is it cool to talk on the phone?' I mean, even if it is cool, if you have to ask 'Is it cool, then it isn't cool. You know. Like those blind kids, people are going to start putting together their own private telephone companies if they want to really talk. And you know what else. You don't hear silences on the phone anymore. They've got this time-sharing thing on long-distance lines where you make a pause and they snip out that piece of time and use it to carry part of somebody else's conversation. Instead of a pause, where somebody's maybe breathing or sighing, you get this blank hole and you only start hearing again when someone says a word and even the beginning of the word is clipped off. Silences don't count—you're paying for them, but they take them away from you. It's not cool to talk and you can't hear someone when they don't talk. What the hell good is the phone? I wouldn't mind seeing them totally screwed."

THE BIG MEMPHIS BUST

Joe Engressia never wanted to screw Ma Bell. His dream had always been to work for her.

The day I visited Joe in his small apartment on Union Avenue in Memphis, he was upset about another setback in his application for a telephone job.

"They're stalling on it. I got a letter today telling me they'd have to postpone the interview I requested again. My landlord read it for me. They gave me some runaround about wanting papers on my rehabilitation status but I think there's something else going on."

When I switched on the 40-watt bulb in

Joe's room—he sometimes forgets when he has guests—it looked as if there was enough telephone hardware to start a small phone company of his own.

There is one phone on top of his desk, one phone sitting in an open drawer beneath the desk top. Next to the desk-top phone is a cigar-box-size M-F device with big toggle switches, and next to that is some kind of switching and coupling device with jacks and alligator plugs hanging loose. Next to that is a Braille typewriter. On the floor next to the desk, lying upside down like a dead tortoise, is the half-gutted body of an old black standard phone. Across the room on a torn and dusty couch are two more phones, one of them a touch-tone model; two tape recorders; a heap of phone patches and cassettes, and a lifesize toy telephone.

Our conversation is interrupted every ten minutes by phone phreaks from all over the country ringing Joe on just about every piece of equipment but the toy phone and the Braille typewriter. One fourteen-year-old *blind* kid from Connecticut calls up and tells Joe he's got a girl friend. He wants to talk to Joe about girl friends. Joe says they'll talk later in the evening when they can be alone on the line. Joe draws a deep breath, whistles him off the air with an earsplitting 2600-cycle whistle. Joe is pleased to get the calls but he looked worried and preoccupied that evening, his brow constantly furrowed over his dark wandering eyes. In addition to the phone-company stall, he has just learned that his apartment house is due to be demolished in sixty days for urban renewal. For all its shabbiness, the Union Avenue apartment has been Joe's first home-of-his-own and he's worried that he may not find another before this one is demolished.

But what really bothers Joe is that switchmen haven't been listening to him. "I've been doing some checking on 800 numbers lately, and I've discovered that certain 800 numbers in New Hampshire couldn't be reached from Missouri and Kansas. Now it may sound like a small thing, but I don't like to see sloppy work; it makes me feel bad about the lines. So I've been calling up switching offices and reporting it, but they haven't corrected it. I called them up for the third time today and instead of checking they just got mad. Well, that gets me mad. I mean, I do try to help them. There's something about them I can't understand—you want to help them and they just try to say you're defrauding them."

It is Sunday evening and Joe invites me to join him for dinner at a Holiday Inn. Frequently on Sunday evening Joe takes some of his welfare money, calls a cab, and treats himself to a steak dinner at one of Memphis' thirteen Holiday Inns. (Memphis is the headquarters of Holiday Inn. Holiday Inns have been a favorite for Joe ever since he made his first solo phone trip to a Bell switching office in Jacksonville, Florida, and stayed in the Holiday Inn there. He likes to stay at Holiday Inns, he explains, because they represent freedom to him and because the rooms are arranged the same all over the country so he knows that any Holiday Inn room is familiar territory to him. Just like any telephone.)

Over steaks in the Pinnacle Restaurant of the Holiday Inn Medical Center on Madison Avenue in Memphis, Joe tells me the highlights of his life as a phone phreak.

At age seven, Joe learned his first phone trick. A mean baby-sitter, tired of listening to little Joe play with the phone as he always did, constantly, put a lock on the phone dial. "I got so mad. When there's a phone sitting there and I can't use it...so I started getting mad and banging the receiver up and down. I noticed I banged it once and it dialed one. Well, then I tried banging it twice...." In a few minutes Joe learned how to dial by pressing the hook switch at the right time. "I was so excited I remember going 'whoa whoa' and beat a box down on the floor."

At age eight Joe learned about whistling. "I was listening to some intercept nonworking-number recording in L.A.—I was calling L.A. as far back as that, but I'd mainly dial non-working numbers because there was no charge, and I'd listen to these recordings all day. Well, I was whistling 'cause listening to these recordings can be boring after a while even if they are from L.A., and all of a sudden, in the middle of whistling, the recording clicked off. I fiddled around whistling some more, and the same thing happened. So I called up the switch room and said, 'I'm Joe. I'm eight years old and I want to know why when I whistle this tune the line clicks off.' He tried to explain it to me, but it was a little too technical at the time. I went on learning. That was a thing nobody was going to stop me from doing. The phones were my life, and I was going to pay any price to keep on learning. I knew I could go to jail. But I had to do what I had to do to keep on learning."

The phone is ringing when we walk back into Joe's apartment on Union Avenue. It is

Captain Crunch. The Captain has been following me around by phone, calling up everywhere I go with additional bits of advice and explanation for me and whatever phone phreak I happen to be visiting. This time the Captain reports he is calling from what he describes as "my hideaway high up in the Sierra Nevada." He pulses out lusty salvos of M-F and tells Joe he is about to "go out and get a little action tonight. Do some phreaking of another kind, if you know what I mean." Joe chuckles.

The Captain then tells me to make sure I understand that what he told me about tying up the nation's phone lines was true, but that he and the phone phreaks *he* knew never used the technique for sabotage. They only learned the technique to help the phone company.

"We do a lot of troubleshoofing for them. Like this New Hampshire/Missouri WATS-line flaw I've been screaming about. We help them more than they know."

After we say good-bye to the Captain and Joe whistles him off the line, Joe tells me about a disturbing dream he had the night before: "I had been caught and they were taking me to a prison. It was a long trip. They were taking me to a prison a long long way away. And we stopped at a Holiday Inn and it was my last night ever at a Holiday Inn, and I was crying night ever using the phone and I was crying and crying, and the lady at the Holiday Inn said, 'Gosh, honey, you should never be sad at a Holiday Inn. You should always be happy here. Especially since it's your last night.' And that just made it worse and I was sobbing so much I couldn't stand it."

Two weeks after I left Joe Engressia's apartment, phone-company security agents and Memphis police broke into it. Armed with a warrant, which they left pinned to a wall, they confiscated every piece of equipment in the room, including his toy telephone. Joe was placed under arrest and taken to the city jail where he was forced to spend the night since he had no money and knew no one in Memphis to call.

It is not clear who told Joe what that night, but someone told him that the phone company had an open-and-shut case against him because of revelations of illegal activity he had made to a phone-company undercover agent.

By morning Joe had become convinced that the reporter from Esquire, with whom he had spoken two weeks ago, was the undercover agent. He probably had ugly thoughts about someone he couldn't see gaining his confi-

dence, listening to him talk about his personal obsessions and dreams, while planning all the while to lock him up.

"I really thought he was a reporter," Engressia told the Memphis *Press-Scimitar*.

"I told him everything...." Feeling betrayed, Joe proceeded to confess everything to the press and police.

As it turns out, the phone company *did* use an undercover agent to trap Joe, although it was not the Esquire reporter.

Ironically, security agents were alerted and began to compile a case against Joe because of one of his acts of love for the system: Joe had called an internal service department to report that he had located a group of defective long-distance trunks, and to complain again about the New Hampshire/Missouri WATS problem. Joe always liked Ma Bell's lines to be clean and responsive. A suspicious switchman reported Joe to the security agents who discovered that Joe had never had a long-distance call charged to his name.

Then the security agents learned that Joe was planning one of his phone trips to a local switching office. The security people planted one of their agents in the switching office. He posed as a student switchman and followed Joe around on a tour. He was extremely friendly and helpful to Joe, leading him around the office by the arm. When the tour was over he offered Joe a ride back to his apartment house. On the way he asked Joe—one tech man to another—about "those blue boxes" he'd heard about. Joe talked about them freely, talked about his blue box freely, and about all the other things he could do with the phones.

The next day the phone-company security agents slapped a monitoring tape on Joe's line, which eventually picked up an illegal call. Then they applied for the search warrant and broke in.

In court Joe pleaded not guilty to possession of a blue box and theft of service. A sympathetic judge reduced the charges to malicious mischief and found him guilty on that count, sentenced him to two thirty-day sentences to be served concurrently and then suspended the sentence on condition that Joe promise never to play with phones again. Joe promised, but the phone company refused to restore his service. For two weeks after the trial Joe could not be reached except through the pay phone at his apartment house, and the landlord screened all calls for him.

Phone-phreak Carl managed to get through

to Joe after the trial, and reported that Joe sounded crushed by the whole affair.

"What I'm worried about," Carl told me, "is that Joe means it this time. The promise. That he'll never phone-phreak again. That's what he told me, that he's given up phone-phreaking for good. I mean his entire life. He says he knows they're going to be watching him so closely for the rest of his life he'll never be able to make a move without going straight to jail. He sounded very broken up by the whole experience of being in jail. It was awful to hear him talk that way. I don't know. I hope maybe he had to sound that way. Over the phone, you know."

He reports that the entire phone-phreak underground is up in arms over the phone company's treatment of Joe. "All the while Joe had his hopes pinned on his application for a phone-company job, they were stringing him along getting ready to bust him. That gets me mad. Joe spent most of his time helping them out. The bastards. They think they can use him as an example. All of a sudden they're harassing us on the coast. Agents are jumping up on our lines. They just busted —'s mute yesterday and ripped out his lines. But no matter what Joe does, I don't think we're going to take this lying down."

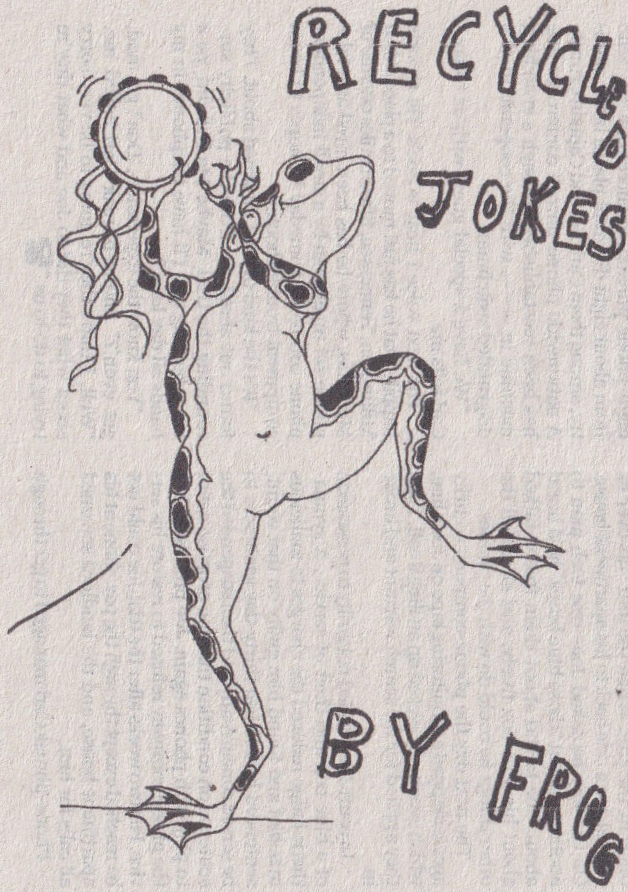
Two weeks later my phone rings and about eight phone phreaks in succession say "hello from about eight different places in the country, among them Carl, Ed, and Captain Crunch. A nationwide phone-phreak conference line has been reestablished through a switching machine in ———, with the cooperation of a disgruntled switchman.

"We have a special guest with us today," Carl tells me.

The next voice I hear is Joe's. He reports happily that he has just moved to a place called Millington, Tennessee, fifteen miles outside of Memphis, where he has been hired as a telephone-set repairman by a small independent phone company. Someday he hopes to be an equipment troubleshooter.

"It's the kind of job I dreamed about. They found out about me from the publicity surrounding the trial. Maybe Ma Bell did me a favor busting me. I'll have telephones in my hands all day long."

"You know the expression, 'Don't get mad, get even?'" phone-phreak Carl asked me. "Well, I think they're going to be very sorry about what they did to Joe and what they're trying to do to us."



* A man was walking along a pier counting the slits between the boards, "One, two, three..." when another man approached him and asked, "What are you doing?" "I am counting the slits on the pier," answered the first man. "I know, but why?" asked the other. "Because they are there!" shouted the fellow. Completely perplexed, the second man went on his way muttering, "That is the strangest thing I have ever seen." The fellow continued his business counting slits. He soon came to the end of the pier and fell into the ocean. The moral of the story is: When you're out of slits, you're out of pier.

FOLK WRITING: WHAT IS IT AND WHAT'S IT GOOD FOR?

In 1975 I began keeping a more or less running journal in little memo books I bought at Plaza Pharmacy in Atlanta for 39 cents. Mostly, they were a pretty disorganized collection of observations, quotations, recommendations, opinions and jokes -- but soon I was hopelessly addicted to writing them. Whole cigar boxes, which I also obtained at Plaza, filled with little notebooks began stacking up in corners. So I decided to give what I was doing a name; I decided to call it folk writing.

Excellent therapy for whatever ails you, folk writings can be like the pearls oysters build up around irritating particles in their houses. Utopian daydreams in your folk scribbles can be shared with friends to open up subjects of conversation you usually find too intimate or fanciful to bring up in discussions.

Recently I discovered that folk writing is an old tradition originated by Chinese sages, who kept rambling journals that moved abruptly from one subject to another -- covering everything from changes in the weather to centipede-eating hermits, punctuated from time to time with sketched illustrations. (After reading this, I quoted it and sketched an illustration of a centipede eating a hermit.)

What is folk writing? It is anything you scibble by hand not intended originally for publication, but for sharing with friends and other eccentrics. That there could be folk writing readings, something like poetry readings, is an idea that keeps nagging at me.

Folk writing could catch on and become a very big counter-cultural literary form in the United States of America. Folk writings may include anything -- rants, poems, weird events, song lyrics, ideas for books you will probably never write, pot shots, replies to the morning news, things you overhear, laundry lists, things your kids say. I treasure my little notebooks, but I'll send one to anybody for three bucks, which I would treasure more, if you want to begin a collection of folk writings by the originator of modern-day folk writing. Or I will also exchange my folk writings for yours -- one little notebook for another.

Let's take this idea and run with it and do something important! Write me at Box 19441, Tampa, Florida 33679. Address it to the American Folk Writer's Guild in care of Fly-by-Night Press.

Plainly, Kerry Wendell Thornley

OK so it shoots right through you like a feeling

PICTURE THIS:

words by
true

You are dancing in a crowded room with your old best friend in the whole entire world.

Dancing,

but not touching.

Boom mic dips into frame.

The best sex of your life in America involves

literal hysteria and years of resentment—

x It happens here.

The feeling still remains.

There's an Earthquake rocking to the core,

you lose the house, your mother finally cries. The foundation's crumbling...

What good is an action plan.

You are waiting for a train when

—one approaches the opposing platform—

Fuck me, right?

Small girl requests you hold foot.

They rebuild bridges, tunnels get dug out or else they're left as only

hollowed open passageways.

Where sixteen year olds are learning how to drive.

What else?

There's a taste that lingers, another war breaks out,
another miracle drug, another diet. Analysts predict
earthtones and olive drab, slim silhouettes coming back.

Trend forecast calls for rain. You are beautiful, and so
young, the swirling locus of a swarm of wonderful emotion.

Think again: Bangs are botched. Bangs are botched. Bangs are botched.

You hear quiet conversation through the walls of
a dinner party,
you are carried off to bed.
The ambience is nascent, and warm. Flowing.

Across the street,

a light turns on. Second story.

another window lights up on the fifth.
There's an amount of time between them,
something communicated herein.

And then across the street,

It happens in a flash.

You miss your flight, crack your phonescreen, the dirt hardens before it cakes.
Something's "going on" with Jupiter—Do you eat dairy, fish, Italian? Avoid travel by water for this period. You'll know
Just one of those things.
It'll all make sense.

So what?

So what so the batteries are
all corroded, heaven's gone and ended, it's done, washed, we're fucking finished.
It's never been over, it's always been back. In other news, unprecedented advancements in medicine
will now allow for encoding the genome specified into the hypothetical child up to six months before conception, there's
even an option for "mixed race". Time for another relapse.

You lose your credit card, you order another, you can't go back. Now we're getting somewhere.
half underneath you. The possibility of being seen is always the goal here.

A horizontal perspective helps.
Fold the girl in

A draft has opened up to let you know the cold's coming. Out there where the fever breaks.
There's a little girl running around the future,
she looks just like you.
While carpet fibers are collecting and resurrecting a captive remnant of your hair and old dead skin,
a projection map created on the surface, powder foundation's the worst of it,
you scrub and scrub, rinse, abrade.

Somewhere in the distance a car won't start;
An indicator light blinks on,

The engine turns over, and then it turns over again.
blinks off, indicates.

You have the same dream every night.

**YOU ARE HERE.
YOU ARE ACHING.
YOU ARE ACTUALLY STILL THERE.**

You are the absolute center of a firework, right at the precise moment of its own eruption, the memory of ascent still burned into the optic nerve. A solar flare, flaring. A star's collapsing, black hole's lapsing, the closing of some massive, prismatic distance, crashing, camera flashing, hits most gorgeous woman you've ever seen today as sun coruscates to a close, an end, last waxing, it is bright, and glorious, and happening, and holy shit it's glorious, holy shit it's happening, holy shit the rapture's back in fashion, they built a new Manhattan, they manufactured happiness, they recreated the magic, it's back, spectacular, miraculous, you're acting, and: stay tuned for the question everyone's been asking...
...Where've you been all this time?

All clear, just like you said.
You see an infinite distance in all directions all at once.

Don't you want to know what it feels like?

Overexposure.

Bleach bypass.

Color dodge.

Iris up.

INTERIOR: You are alone. It's morning.

Everyone, for the most part, survived.

There was really very little fanfare when it came down to it. No actual events did occur. But there were aberrations, naturally. Did you know, for example, there is enough electricity in the resting human body to power a household lamp? Lord, it was almost perfect.

THERE ARE WOMEN LIVING IN THIS CITY

NO ONE RALLIED. NO PROTESTS.

After the morning news bulletin, the usual reaction now comes out, frankly and arrestedly, Is that all? If there was a candle going, then it's just the flame that's stopped. And it must be noted, as a matter of course, that something like this had happened once before. That's what made it so peculiar, we just weren't expecting it. It's a miracle we were all there at the same time.

They've got dogs and car chargers and problems. Diagnoses and appointments and caesarian sections. Memories of airplane rides and actual amphetamines, normal and warm things. Most were, at one point or another, children, but all that mess wears off given time and a well-populated social calendar, ample obligation or legitimate responsibility. It was only natural. The sequence of events, up to and including the current, was clear, though at the start it hadn't ever been. It was all just a series of tasks imbued with vague importance to varying degrees. Not one was insurmountable independently. But we hadn't known, didn't know, never knew, what to make of the result. That by the end of it, to little notice and much of our chagrin, the individual moments never could be fully accounted for. Somehow both more, and less, than the sum of its parts. It was, for its own sake, a widespread and concentrated period of split attentions. And what if, then, when one day the cards fall where they may not, what then? I'll tell you what then. Here is the place, and its fabric. Here is its entire history and shared colloquial context. Here are the important events, in vignette form, and the red lines crossing empty space between them. Here is the fashion of its time and the general atmosphere. Here is the sound, and here is the image. And here is the cast of characters, dramatic personae. But at the end of the day, it's only ever really about the rhythm. Rhythm, my God, what a phrase.

Q: Which is the English word with the most definitions in the dictionary?

A: "Run"

The block didn't stop smelling for weeks.

Things had been different ever since, but still others were all the same. Everyone met each other, people married. Advertisements stayed. Evictions were only paused for a short while. Little boys still played too roughly with little girls, still felt immediate remorse when she started to cry, still stroked the back of her head and told her it didn't hurt, she didn't feel it, et cetera, and still didn't realize what all they were doing by this. Each day reported births, deaths, bar and bat mitzvahs. Young people generally agreed that excess was the way. But in hospitals, the sick keep watching the corners, waiting for the angels or breakfast. People went in for surgeries and made it, didn't, prayed. There were nights where absolutely no-one slept. Cinema was already dead, theatre remained in a state of decay. Radical groups behaved radically. And lovers were moving each other's hair off necks, shoulders, just to get a little bit closer. The only taxis left are the ones that are here, same with everything. Is that all? Is anything? One can have romantic feelings over pretty much whatever. In any case, it is important to remember seriously and fairly the order of the given thing. Is it not true that all the smoke detectors in the house, and all the lightbulbs, tend to go out around the same time, due simply to when they were put in?

But sometimes,
the center does,
in fact, hold.

Just jet lagged, he would say. And though it was a cruel joke, they laughed and laughed for hours. Repairs remained incomplete. They never did publicize the terrorist's face, but we all swore we saw his eyes. And to the sentence "I really have a great deal of hope," one could add, "for you, especially." Everything you see.

The wire's live, it's all happening.

SHE SAID: DON'T BE A LOUSE.

There's been a situation in an area, expect delays...

So you did get the Chinatown office, you did attain the company card, you did incorporate and hire interns and set the date—Things were advancing mostly as promised. There was a name, which was a purpose, was true. It was sent to print biannually and it came back beautiful, one hundred twenty sheets of four-color, perfect-bound, just as it should be. They'd even started a horoscopes column on the web. The audience was growing, readership increased tenfold. And since when, in the grand scheme of things, is one voice not to speak for the group? It was all just a means to an end. We were an army set to motion, little wheels turning and sputtering about, full of ideas for the forthcoming fall issue. It was all so meaningful, and real. Nothing will ever be that important again. Not ever. Those days had this pervasive feeling you could locate in the gold September air.



SO NOW WE KNOW

...collagen, biotin, vitamin C, infused with citrus, magnesium citrate, magnesium glycinate, apple cider vinegar, folic acid, fish oil, mct oil, probiotic, black cohosh, B-12, zinc, pre-natal, iron, multi, women's multi, women's multi with extra iron, flintstones variety...

like they were never going to end, didn't they? Well they did end. The comings and goings of the natural sort, signs of quiet disaster and those singular devastations, that grand constancy of the little machine, and the tendency of its pieces to progress along the fixed-track mechanism, this movement's capacity to so regularly define a life, too, continued right alongside. And it was, I should say, six in the morning, when one was awoken in the not-so-unusual way, thinking that the whole ordeal was still happening. And what was, in any case, still happening? To borrow charitably from Dickinson, if you want me to tell it to you slant, here it is: The cards did not, in fact, fall where they may. And when the bombs went off on all the bridges, and the tunnels, we all remembered about that it's an island because it didn't go down—

It went up...

Q: Do you ever think that there was something vital we were always just missing?

A: No.

Hot water and steam to open the pores, ice water to slim the face and close them. Exfoliate, moisturize, dermaplane, fuck it, shave your legs in the bathroom sink. Just a little, close enough. Concealer, foundation, basic lip stain, neutral base, natural basic, the perfect no makeup makeup look. Too heavy on the upper eyelid and it weighs down the whole face. But a simple dot of white on the inner corner can do wonders for brightening your appearance. Hair looking flat? Massage in gently a leave-in or a little argan oil and one last bodycheck before you're on your way, count the nocks in your spine—All of this is, to be clear, required. All this and you, too, can participate in the dream of the American beautiful, the essential impossible, the perfect imperative, the perfection narrative you do, by and large, perpetuate with all those girls in the photos you pour over, airbrushing pores and slight distortions. Day in, day out. Time, and again.

Another sign. Call this number for a chance to win a free brain scan!
Just answer one simple question: 12, 24, 48, 96, _____. Find the pattern. Solve for x .

For a healthy breakfast, opt for a cigarette on the walk to the train—Spend time in a fast state. Slim kind, dollar sign twenty five. What are they, imported? Cashier doesn't laugh. Like most things, people pay what it costs if they have to.



DO: Mixed greens, fluorescents, slumber party
DON'T: Catastrophizing, Tight Grip, Prophecy.

The third elevator in our building never worked, only we didn't care of Law & Order that they shut down the elevators and we realized, all of us, in relatively similar time, that we hadn't, as a matter of general consequence, ever taken the one at the end. When they pried the doors open with that great device, they found thought toward the other. It wasn't arousing so much as a passing always arriving in time to avoid two functioning exactly as intended, eral years, on account of the other to know. No one noticed for sev- still inside. Headline: NOT OUT OF SERVICE—JUST OCCUPIED. Authorities said she looked exactly like Elizabeth Berkeley, in her time. That was the week we took the stairs.

It ought be taken as truth or currency that when one wants to be pleasantly surprised one will instead be

Always.

CAPRICORN, TODAY'S DATE: Keep going—The cycle may one day reach its logical end. But beware of cynicism, it only creates a lack of clarity. This is an auspicious time in your work, and how it relates to your love life, but beware of its potential to pollute new dynamics. You deal the cards, yes, but you've got to do it one at a time.

Iced coffee with no ice.

dictated by nothing but an immaculate composition and a specific, yet indefinable temperament. Other-wise, they swiveled their chairs against each other and huddled into a knot of conversation, gossip, chatter. But when you walk in their chairs swivel back, and fingers hit keyboards again. Business as usual.

became the whole entire world for that moment. They wrote up titanes weekly on advancements and misfortunes in dating, dieting, drugs—women's business. When their nails weren't clattering against the keyboards, they were pinning and un-pinning photos to a large tackboard hanging overhead,

The girls in the office—Mary, Harriet, Susanne, and Annette—seem to be getting in earlier and earlier each day, so much so that it would seem impossible to beat them. Outside this place, God knows what these girls get into. They were impentable, practically, until they locked onto you and opened up, and you

But wouldn't you say the choir also deserves preaching, at least a little?



IT'S A WHOLE PRODUCTION

At the magazine, it is someone's job to do each part—That is just the natural order of things. This includes the typesetting, layouts, line edits, interview transcriptions, photography, model handling, coffeemaking, the cleaning and cataloguing of things, not to mention the staff writers, columnists, rockstar novelists, literal journalists, and their fact-checkers, among other things. This also includes the advertising. So you do walk in.

The task at hand is remarkably simple and it lasts a lifetime. To sell these girls on a vision, a dream, an ambience. A forever ephemera, that ineluctable impossibility. A correctness in living, what exists but ineffably and permanently. Ineffable, I'll say. It's like taking a closeup of a landscape. This next campaign's a promise of perfection, or it's supposed to be, anyways. *A flash photo of a mirror without reflection*, that's what she wants.

Q: What have you got?

A: White text on white background.

Well, it's a start.

In one moment, hours poured into this. And in another, the hours go away. The effect remains the same. See, there was no more vibe to shift, we already vibrated all the way. Off the planet, but still on deadline. You are here. Selling nothing is selling everything, like telling the public their own name. And the correction should be issued that it cannot, in actuality, be surmounted. This has created a dire crisis of hope, for no apparent reason. Needless to say, the well has, proverbially and literally, run dry.

Nobody else seems to be having any problem with it.
The air, though well conditioned, grows thick with reproach.

Gorgeous. Our night editor
used to be a race car driver
before this. He walks with a
slight limp, though still quickly.
It is his understanding, as
is the understanding of this
magazine as a total whole,
that, on general principle,
the minimum amount of time
required for a given task is
the amount of time that it
should take, without fail,
on each occasion. It is pos-
sible, said the founder and
editor-in-chief one day, to
maintain perfection at maxi-
mum speed. One needs only
an adequate intention set. No
one's gotten really through to
her in a while, though.

Not since it happened,
anyways.

talent, has been dating one of
the models for almost a year,
his longest relationship yet.
In a strange turn of events,
they're actually not having
sex. People get famous every
day, others develop sensitivity-
ties to common foods, behav-
iors, bizarre addictions. And
sometimes certain individuals,
with an ordinarily fixed head
on their shoulders, run right
out into traffic. Roaches crawl
out of outlets, then fear the
lights overhead, scatter. The
other day a guy with a harrow
in his eyes and skin so pink
he could be a burn victim said
That tears it.

It is like that, at times.

The in-house literary critic,
when pressed about the newest
debut she's set to review,
only ever says Oh, so good.
Else, when the novel's not
So good, it's Utter shit. Her
actual reviews, circulating
both in-print and on-line,
go little deeper than that.
But when asked about the
state of contemporary litera-
ture, she would only say:

Isn't it thrilling?

The most recalcitrant of our
regular photographers, whose
lecherousness is mild at best
and far outweighed by his

After that whole bridge and tunnel business, it's understood that the founder met a documentary photographer who quickly became a classical lesbian limerance case, a mania in her own right, a project of obsessive, though perverse, devotion. While it was happening, actually, they met on the train. We always wondered why she chose to be there, when the bombs went off, why she wanted to feel it happen, but now we think she knew, or it was, in some fashion, pre-destined. Whatever it is they're working on, it's more important than anything ever has been. There was, early on, some speculation she was one of the casualties, though regular telegrams and the occasional midnight sightings maintain—She's around, only busy. Not out of service, just occupied. She's in her studio most days, locked away. Some of the girls think she lost her mind. And still, others actually have. Maybe it really is all that guilt.

Could it be this easy? Maybe nothing ever goes away.

■ ■ ■

And then there's the shoe that has been at the top of the staircase for a period of several months.

At one time, there were two of them, until the first one fell. No one knows where they came from or to whom they belong. It was the middle of another manic all-night stretch, all of us hunched over computers, desks, properly appreciating a common goal as one would a good woman, that the other shoe, quite literally, dropped. It made several sharp sounds on its descent, one for each step. And when the pregnant somnambulist went into labor, she woke up already at the hospital, but she still had to wait. She awoke in time to hear only the punchline to a fellow patient's inordinately long joke—And he was a Jewish rabbi!—Everybody laughed. It is appropriate to go about this life with a reasonable degree of suspicion, but it appears that some things are exactly what they're cracked up to be.

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COMPROMISE!

So the data was completely lost. So the camel's back shattered and the straw broke too. Murphy had his way. Years of photos, months of work toward the next issue, every layout, finished spread. Every zero, and every one. Somehow it all just went away. Call it force majeure, a black streak, chock it up to plain bad luck or impeccable timing. Truly, it was the most inexplicable thing. But I will tell you that what it was was that a hard drive was dropped from a height of about eight inches, and that's what did it. The center is said to have held out as long as it could.

It is only in situations such as these that one is reminded of the cruel fragility of the framework underpinning it all, and of course the protections that could have been in place. It is very likely that the whole of human history will get "figured out" in hindsight. But then it's also true that having a gun in the house increases the risk of suicide times eight in men, and thirty five in women. All that matters is we go to press in a week and we've got nothing. But weren't you just saying that you're due for a miracle? In this instance it is not the miracle that's provided but the opportunity. Isn't it special? To be allowed to participate? To be a part of it? The matter is critical, terminal, urgent—Things have got to get real, real quick.

We had a brief post-mortem briefing followed by a mock-funeral, and then we got to work. During the mock-service, the mock-priest said *Please rise, if you care to, or you're able to*. Pretty low stakes, then.

DO: Floor-to-ceiling, Somersaults, Excuses.

DON'T: Paper Airplanes, Guilty Pleasures, Kiss of Death.

We didn't leave the office that whole week. It felt like a return to some old, ancient way. Without exaggeration, the chaos cannot be overstated. And yet we still moved in a measured fashion, thoroughly, judiciously, and with great freedom, at immense speed. We had no chance to second guess, we left no room for doubt, all time was reaction time. Models were brought in last minute, pieces were rewritten off memory alone, the coffeemaker was filled, emptied, filled again. We slept in shifts or not at all, and in this period there were, to the best of our recollection, no dreams. It could be described as somewhat glorious. It was.

"Do excuses?"



Q: What is the actual definition of “quantum”?

A: The minimum amount of any physical entity involved in an interaction.

ON A PARTICULAR NIGHT, some speed freak with a dangerous idea of romance climbed right up the side of the building, scaled it all the way to the roof, and called it a test of God. When she came back down she was shaking, incredibly lucid, saying: *I wasn't afraid at all*. A bystander, who saw the whole scene play out by standing by, stated on the comedown, *You're amazing!* This is recorded only because the aftermath was nearly fatal. One must imagine it did feel at least five stories closer to heaven, up there. There have been many inaccuracies reported since, and a nearly equal amount of corrections. Sometimes it feels like one long meal with many breaks. Which explains the anorexics.

The book was published under the category of **nonfiction**. The author had this to say:

IT WAS REAL, I SAW IT.

Allegedly, the editor of the sexy cultural publication got lunch with the editor of the serious literary journal, where they ran into the editor of the sleazy gossip rag. They all ordered the Caesar salad. While the Jungian analyst and the Lacanian analyst were separately cheating on each other with the same Freudian analyst. Somewhere inside all of them, I think they knew. And the five foot four male gallerist was talking to the controversial artist about how challenging it was to make art in response to the spirit of our times.

It was becoming incredibly easy, though, to get lost these days.

The set dresser/witch and the boom operator/magician found it hard, though not impossible, to believe that they hadn't crossed paths before this. Different worlds, it seems.

IT IS, IN FACT, A PROMISE.

Smoke condition up ahead. But the firemen failed to consider that the child, who was six-years-old at the time of the event, and who lived across the street from the garage which caught fire regularly, didn't want to be rescued from the flames, even though it's all he kept saying. Sometimes things just catch on fire. Some things need not be explained. We sent to print on-time. Everything stayed the same.



WOULD YOU CALL THIS FAITH?

Would you call this an era of inimitable peace, would you call this sovereignty? Well, you are alone, and it is morning, so what then? And so what if they never publicised the terrorist's face, but we all swore we saw his eyes, what then? Except, in actual fact, it wasn't one, but many, and they were women. And what was it you said about body dysmorphia and God, if I made an appeal to the honest and traditional sort would you believe in something then? There are some days where it rains and we don't know how, and still others where one can feel, over and over, the bombs going off—What are we going to do about that? Curiosity kills, but it's much worse, whatever you'd call this. It is thrilling, yes, in the way that a murder is. And when the phone rings, it's never who you want it to be. It's true that some things just go missing and they don't come back, it's no one's fault. But I miss them terribly.

DO: Epiphanies, Spotlights, Hidden Gems.
DON'T: Pattern Recognition, Trapdoors, TV Dinner



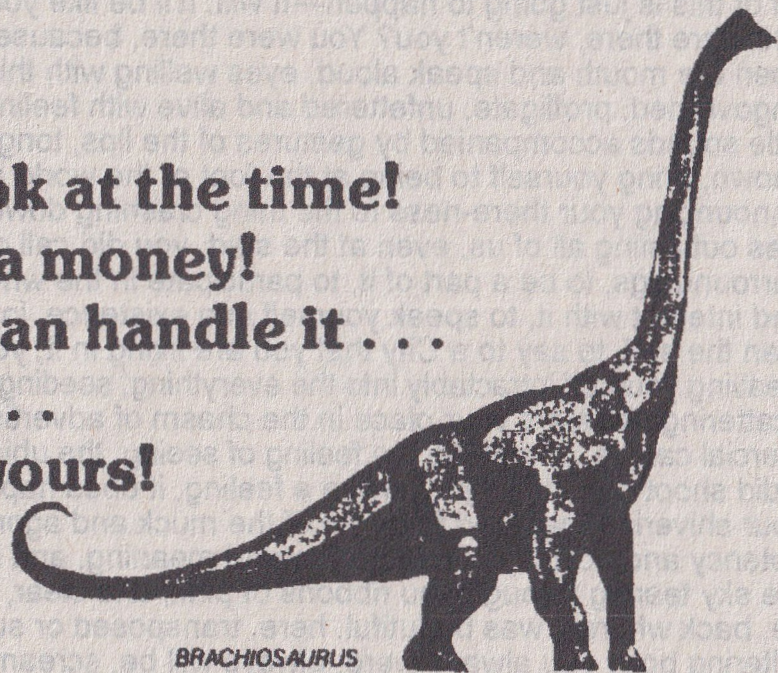
Q: Is that all?

A: Yes, that's all.

All of this is just going to happen—It will. It'll be like you were never even there. But you were there, weren't you? You were there, because you had to be. And you did then open the mouth and speak aloud, eyes welling with this great and insurmountable shit, ungoverned, profligate, unfettered and alive with feeling spilling out, and images, little sounds accompanied by gestures of the lips, tongue, teeth, so as to make yourself known, bring yourself to being at the foot of the world as if pronouncing your own name, announcing your there-ness to the thing crashing down around you, the place which was outlasting all of us, even at the start, you did call out into the impeccably there surroundings, to be a part of it, to participate in the whole rotten structure, to engage and interact with it, to speak yourself into existence, into union with a business greater than the self, to say to a City that you are living in it, you are there, you do have to be, weaving yourself intractably into the everything, seeding into it, the history, the moment, scattering like stars your place in the chasm of advertising, perfect like only the commercial can be, primal like the feeling of seeing, the ubiquitous, the divine understanding, it did shoot right through you like a feeling, it does happen in a flash, and you did pull your shivering, battered form out of the muck and agonizing brine of mediocrity into the potency and ecstasy of real unguarded meaning, and it was, to say the least, a miracle, the sky tearing through you ribbons of pink, and clear, and glowing, like how it used to be, back where it was beautiful, here, transposed or superimposed onto this image, the faltering body you always were, always will be, screaming softly in a faint and hollow whisper, you did then speak aloud, smiling, crying, grateful:

**LIFE: THERE'S
JUST SO MUCH OF IT.**

It's so easy!
It's such fun!
WHOOOPS! Look at the time!
Gotta eat! Outa money!
Stay cool, you can handle it . . .
and, as of now . . .
the game is all yours!



BRACHIOSAURUS